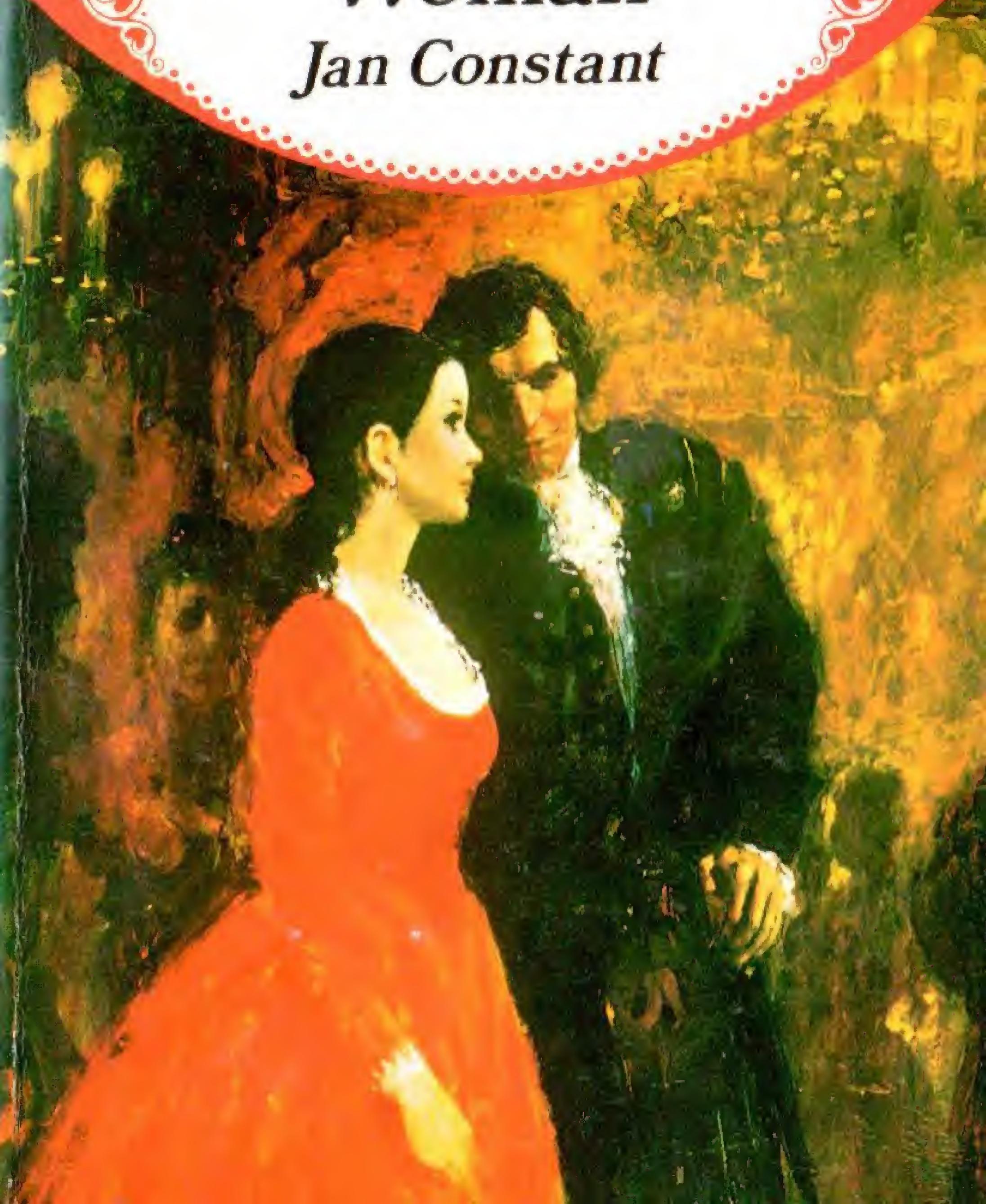




Masquerade Historical Romances

MacKenzie's Woman

Jan Constant



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Twenty years after Culloden, Alex MacKenzie finds a young English girl, Jenna Winslow, shivering and starving in one of the mouldering crofts on his newly acquired estates. When he discovers that she is the daughter of the man who so humiliated the arrogant Highlander's family after the battle, Alex's desire for revenge is fierce. He takes her as his mistress — to humiliate at leisure — and what can the once-proud girl do but submit?

In a savage Scottish world where people hate her very name, how can Jenna lose the hateful title of 'MacKenzie's Woman' when Alex is both her very livelihood and her only protection?



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United Kingdom
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80p net
\$2.95*
\$3.95

ISBN 0 263 73667 9

All prices are subject to
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THE REBEL AND THE REDCOAT



***MacKenzie's
Woman***
Jan Constant



MILLS & BOON LIMITED
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First published 1981

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ISBN 0 263 09929 6

Set in 10 on 11½ pt Times Roman by

*Rowland Phototypesetting Limited,
Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk
Made and printed in Great Britain by
Cox & Wyman Limited, Reading*



CHAPTER ONE

RAIN scudded across the bare beach and Jenna pulled the shawl closer about her head and shoulders and went on searching for driftwood. Above her on its promontory, the Keep was silhouetted against the dark leaden sky, dominating the scene by its harsh outlines and steep, stepped walls and roof. Pausing in her task Jenna looked up at the bleak stone walls towering over her and reflected briefly that from that angle no one could guess that the building was a ruin; it was only upon closer inspection that one could see that the narrow windows were empty and that the sagging roof was rotten and about to fall.

Wind tugged at her skirts and slow waves unrolled across the colourless sand to lap at her feet. Shivering, the girl hugged her shawl tighter and turned to go, her thin, high-heeled shoes leaving a line of indentations behind her as she crossed the beach, making towards the shelter of a lone croft built in the lee of the castle.

Thick ropes held down the heather thatch, speaking of the force of the winter wind, while a low door gave entrance between two tiny windows. The interior was dark, the windows doing little more than serve to show whether it was day or night outside. As she closed the door, smoke caught her breath and with smarting eyes Jenna dropped her gathering beside the fire and thought briefly upon the rightness of calling such a crude shelter 'a black house', for smoke from the fire, which was never let go out, blackened the walls and roof beams,

impregnating the atmosphere and everything in the croft with its darkness and smell.

She made up the fire, wiping her hands fastidiously on a scrap of lace and lawn already crumpled and grimy. Wrinkling her nose in a gesture of disgust, she tossed the handkerchief aside and standing up, looked about her with a hopeless air, her blue silk gown and fine lace ruffles appearing singularly inappropriate in her rough surroundings; even her nut-brown hair had lost its sheen.

With an expression of distaste, she kicked off her wet and ruined slippers and slumped on a stool, stretched her cold feet to the fire, wriggling her toes as the warmth penetrated her thin stockings.

Involuntarily her eyes slid to the empty box-bed against one wall, its blankets neatly folded, and a sigh escaped her as a single tear slid down her cheek. But whether she cried for the late occupant of the bed or for herself, she hardly knew. Until a week ago she had shared the tiny house with Nanny Frazer, an old Highland woman who had been her nurse, but she had complained of pains in her chest, and a few days ago Jenna had found her dead in her chair, her knitting still in her hands.

Men from the village had come and taken her away, carrying her carefully, but refusing to allow Jenna to accompany them. The Minister had seemed unwilling to leave her there alone, but Jenna pointed out that she had nowhere else to go and after a while the clergyman had left reluctantly, shaking his head over her obstinacy and obviously not believing her.

Which was odd, thought Jenna, staring down at her hands in her lap, for it was undoubtedly true. Miss Jenna Winslow, once of Russell Square, London, an heiress with wealth and security behind her and a string of beaux and friends willing to fill her idle hours, now was in the

unenviable position of owning neither friends nor riches. With shocking abruptness her world had been shattered one morning when her maid had woken her with the grim news that her brother, already deeply in debt, had lost the last of his, and her inheritance to an American colonist, and leaving the club in the early hours, had been set upon by thieves and killed before any of his drink-befuddled cronies could come to his aid.

At first Jenna had been surprised and hurt by the scarcity of callers offering their condolences, but later she had grown hard and cynical, understanding only too well the fickle nature of erstwhile friends who cared only for money and position and not at all for human kindness and compassion. She laughed and declared brittly that she would have done the same herself. Trying for a while to hold her head up and go on as usual, she showed herself, uncaring of snubs and stares, in all the fashionable meeting places, but lack of money proved an obstacle which even she could not overcome. With her brother's death all the people who had allowed her credit began to dun her and her position was impossible.

It was then, one sleepless night, that she recalled the one happy period of her childhood.

Long ago, when she and George were children, their soldier father had found favour with the King and had been given the sequestered estate of a Highland Chieftain, who had forfeited his rights to it by fighting for the Stuart Pretender in the Scottish rebellion of 1745. Even now Jenna could remember the frightened anticipation she had felt as they crossed the wild, lonely mountains at the end of their long difficult journey from the kind gentle county of England. Her heart had beaten with excitement as they rode the last few miles into what was alien country, where the people were rude, unfriendly natives, who spoke an unknown language and had a

short while before been their sworn enemies.

The Keep of Hourn had risen before them, like a sentinel on the shore, impressing with its air of invulnerability. To her English eyes, used to castles surrounded by crenellated walls, the Keep tower had seemed odd and strange with its sloping roof and pointed turrets topping the building, which by her standards was too small to be considered a castle, but its very strangeness had won her heart. Within days she was at home in that unknown place, as she had never been in any of the houses her father had provided for his family; and it was to this remembered, childhood haven that she had returned in her distress.

The journey from London had taken days and had proved more difficult than she had imagined, but at last she arrived, weary beyond belief, to find that the Keep, neglected for more than a decade, lay in ruins and was uninhabitable, save for the sea birds and wild animals that made their homes among its ancient walls.

Nanny Frazer had found her there and, chucking like an aged hen over a chick, had borne her off to her own home, listening to her woes with ready sympathy and proving herself willing to forget the years since her nursing had left the Keep and taken up residence in London.

Once of age, George Winslow had proved himself more than willing to live the life of a fashionable fop, spending the fortune his father had amassed with ease and speed, while Jenna took her wealth for granted, accepting all the privilege it brought as of right. She stayed unaware and uncaring in her enclosed circle of the possibility of leading any other kind of life until she was awakened to reality by her brother's murder. That reality was being brought sharply home to her by the fact that the journey from London had exhausted her small stock of money.

She had left with no real thought for the future, flying instead from an impossible present. On the way she had sold the few pieces of jewellery left her by the bailiffs, but now even that was gone. But for the croft and its meagre contents she was destitute, even the store of food was running low and she had no money and no idea how to purchase more provisions.

Listlessly she stirred the porridge in the black pot hanging over the fire, and tipping a ladleful on to a plate, began to eat. Never having had to cook, porridge was the only thing she knew how to prepare, and that only from watching Nanny Frazer. The old woman had set traps, but Jenna knew that even if she caught a rabbit, skinning and gutting it would be beyond her capabilities. Once she had walked into the nearby village in search of aid, but one look at the hostile faces watching her approach and she had lifted her chin and returned proudly to the empty croft as though she had made the long walk merely to take the air.

That had been a few days ago, when a few oatcakes had remained and an inch or so of rabbit stew still covered the bottom of the black pot; now she had to face the very real fact that starvation was not far away, and racking her brains until they ached, she could find no way out of her impossible position.

She had barely finished her meagre meal, finding to her dismay that the food, far from satisfying her, merely served to underline her hunger, when to her surprise she heard the unmistakable sounds of a horse approaching along the winding track, its hoofbeats muffled and softened by the springy turf. Peering from one of the windows, she was in time to see a small, thin man in serviceable brown corduroy, swing himself from the saddle and approach the croft in a determined manner.

After a peremptory knock the latch was lifted before

she could open the door, and the man stood in the entrance, taking in the smoky interior and herself with equal disinterest before he closed the door behind him.

'I was told that Mistress Frazer had died,' he said in an accent that puzzled her. 'So who'll you be?'

'I'm Miss Winslow,' Jenna answered, lifting her eyebrows a little at his manner. 'Mistress Frazer left me the croft and contents.'

'That she canna—it was not hers to leave.'

Trying to hide her dismay at his bold statement, made with such conviction, Jenna demanded an explanation.

'The croft and land belong to the Laird,' he told her impatiently, 'they were only loaned to the Frazers and now that there are no blood kinsmen to inherit, they return to the Master of Hourn.'

Ignoring several puzzling factors in this speech, Jenna repeated that the croft had been left to her.

'The old woman must have been wanting,' the man said roughly, 'for she knew full well it would revert to the Laird at her death, and I'll thank you to be out of here by tomorrow.'

'Who are you?' Jenna demanded, her anger rising at his cursory treatment. 'Don't you know to remove your hat to a lady?'

The small grey eyes narrowed. 'My name is Rory MacKenzie,' he told her. 'I'm factor to Alex MacKenzie who is Laird of this estate, and as to removing my hat—I'll take it off to my betters, and I doubt fine that you're that.'

Jenna gasped at his effrontery. 'I'll thank you to mind your manners,' she said haughtily.

The factor laughed, reminding her of her circumstances, showing his amusement at her air as he studied her, taking in her ruined, expensive, unsuitable gown.

'Winslow, you said,' he murmured thoughtfully. 'I've a mind that I've heard the name before.'

'Doubtless—until recently my family owned the estate of Hourn.'

At once she wished she had not made herself known. Whereas before the man had been merely indifferent to her, now he viewed her with the open hostility she had seen in the village. Stiffening perceptibly, he stared at her with obvious dislike.

'Is that so?' he demanded slowly. 'The MacKenzie will be interested to hear that, I'm sure. I ken fine he's wanted for near on twenty years to meet you.'

Abruptly he wrenched open the door behind him and without another word, left her puzzled and somewhat nervous. His parting words had held more than a hint of a threat, and during the long sleepless night Jenna found herself mulling over several bewildering facts he had mentioned.

Who could be the Master of Hourn, or 'the MacKenzie', of whom he spoke? she wondered. She knew that in the Highlands a man was often called by the estate he owned, and that a MacKenzie had owned that particular part of Ross-shire before it had been granted to her father, but that was nearly twenty years ago and she had seen the deposed family depart herself.

Even now she could clearly recall the sad little group as it set out with the few possessions allowed them. The sick father, carried in a wagon, was attended by his wife and children, and all these years later, Jenna still shivered at the recollection of the fierce animosity in the woman's dark eyes as she flung a final glance over her shoulder at the English family waiting to take possession of her home. Young as she was, the English child had known that only the presence of the impassive Redcoats made such a transaction possible, and even when he had

left the army, her father was always careful to keep a good number of able-bodied and loyal men about the Keep to guard himself and his children from the attack which he knew would inevitably follow a momentary slackness on his part.

Jenna arose next morning fearful of what the day would bring, but when the afternoon was well advanced with no sign of the factor or his master, she began to relax, convincing herself that Rory MacKenzie's threats had been no more than empty talk calculated to make her afraid and boost his own image.

They came just as the day was ending, riding up out of the dusk like wraiths almost as soon as she heard the first muffled sounds of their approach. All she could do by way of defence was to slide the wooden bolt across the door and retire to a corner as far distant as the single room would allow.

A voice called her name, and when she did not answer the door shook under an onslaught of heavy blows that made the old wood groan. The croft seemed to rattle as the men put their shoulders to the task, and suddenly the hinges gave and the door burst open. Men spilled into the room, filling the tiny house with shouts and movements as they milled around in the space between the table and the fire. To Jenna's frightened gaze all seemed confusion and noise and she shrank back into the shadows, hoping to avoid being seen as the intruders overturned furniture and stripped the clothes from the box beds.

With an unintelligible shout hands seized her and she was dragged forward, and thrust towards the man who seemed to be the leader.

Fierce blue eyes examined her, and she had an impression of a tanned face and red hair before he jerked his head in the direction of the door and her captor dragged

her outside, releasing his grasp as he plunged back in to the house.

For a second Jenna stood hesitantly wondering what to do, but while she still paused the men reappeared, hurrying from the croft, their arms filled with the few possessions that had belonged to Nanny Frazer. A cloud of smoke followed them, filling the doorway with a thick blue haze. Jenna stared in amazement, before realising that they must have thrown the less desirable items of furniture and clothing on the fire.

With an inarticulate cry she darted forward, only to have her shoulder caught by the leader as he held her back.

'No,' she cried, 'No! Why have you done that? Who are you? Bandits? Robbers?'

'I am Alex MacKenzie,' he told her briefly, as though that was explanation enough, and above her head his eyes returned to the croft.

Following his gaze, Jenna turned and saw with a throb of horror that smoke was rising uniformly from the heather thatch. With a suddenness that appalled her flames appeared, and in seconds the roof was ablaze from end to end. 'Why?' she demanded of the impassive man beside her, 'Why?'

Something of her fear and desperation sounded in her voice, and Alex MacKenzie's gaze flicked over her. 'The croft returned to me with Mistress Frazer's death.'

'But why burn it?' Something in the wanton destruction of the action appalled her by its ruthlessness, and she made no attempt to hide the disgust in her voice.

'I wanted you to know what it is like to lose your home.'

His reply amazed her and she could only stare at him. Night had fallen by this time, but the red glare from the flames illuminated the scene clearly, flickering highlights

and shadows making fearsome masks out of the faces intently watching their handiwork.

Until then Jenna had supposed that their animosity must have been directed at the dead woman, but with his words she realised with a sick feeling of dread, that their dislike must be towards herself. Looking surreptitiously about her, she saw that their curiously intent and satisfied expressions held an exaltation which could be hardly attributed to firing a small unimportant croft. Warned by an age-old instinct that no good was intended towards herself, she knew that she must get away, and took a cautious step backwards. At that moment the charred beams gave way and with a shower of sparks the roof fell in, claiming all eyes as it did so.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Jenna turned and fled, losing her useless slippers in her flight and slipping and stumbling in her haste, but not stopping until she had reached the shelter of a few spindly birch trees that nestled in a curve of a small river as it turned to the sea.

Pausing only long enough to regain her breath, she looked for some other hiding place, knowing that the trees would be the first place the men would search. A sudden commotion by the burning croft told her that she had been missed, and not waiting for more she picked up her skirts, and scrambling down into the hollow worn by the river, ran along its bed in the only direction left to her.

A thin, watery moon had risen, shedding weak light over the beach, turning the sea and sand to silver and with dismay Jenna realised that it would also clearly show her own presence. Glancing behind her she saw that the men had mounted their horses and had fanned out, obviously searching the countryside. To remain where she was meant that she would be discovered within minutes, and, never one to await her fate tamely,

Jenna stood up and stepped out on to the soft sand, hoping that by some miracle she could reach the shelter of the distant curve of the shore where boulders and stunted trees might afford a hiding place.

The sand was soft and damp underfoot and with each step she sank in a few inches, making her flight slow and awkward. A shout told her that she had been seen, and spurred her to greater efforts. The steady approach of hooves over the sand came relentlessly nearer and still she ran on, though by now all hope of escape had gone. With pounding heart and straining lungs she dodged and twisted, evading her pursuer until at last she became aware that he was playing with her, prolonging the chase for his own enjoyment as a cat does. With the realisation Jenna turned to face him, standing still on legs that trembled with effort, and gasping for breath.

As she had known it would be, her pursuer was the red-haired leader of the men. The rider circled her slowly, his eyes cold and glittering in the moonlight before, bending from the saddle, he scooped her up and deposited her in front of him, holding her there with a grip that hurt and warned that resistance would be useless.

At first Jenna could do little save clutch at the pommel of the saddle and fight to regain her breath, only realising dimly that they had passed the smouldering ruins of the croft and had set off at a good pace along the mountain track in the direction of the village. Hope revived at the knowledge. Surely even the villagers would not condone her abduction, she thought. But before they reached the village they turned off the road, taking a rougher, less well defined route that led she knew not where.

Revived by the cold night wind rushing at her face, she lifted her head and counted the men that rode with her.

To her surprise, for in her fright and confusion she had supposed them much greater in number, she found that there were only four besides the man who named himself MacKenzie. In a short while they arrived at what appeared to be a fairly substantial house, for by its silhouette Jenna could see that it was tall enough to consist of two floors, and there seemed several outbuildings clustered round its walls. They clattered into a cobbled courtyard, and as a door was flung open and light shone from the entrance, Jenna was tossed like a parcel into the arms of one of the followers and carried ignominiously into the house.

She was put on her feet, thrust into a room and the door closed behind her. Candles glowed on the table and on the shelf above the fireplace. Jenna searched the shadows, not moving until she was certain she was alone and then crossing slowly to the fire, holding her hands to the welcome warmth as she examined her surroundings. The room was of good proportions and panelled in some dark wood, the furniture heavy and substantial, such as could be seen in any yeoman's house in England, but was rarely to be found in Scotland.

The woman Jenna had glimpsed behind the light in the open doorway appeared and began to set the table, shooting the girl quick glances as she put out oatcakes and curd cheese. Jenna watched her in silence, gathering her courage as she finished her task and moved to the door.

'Won't you help me?' she asked, her voice shaking.

The woman turned. 'How can I help you?' she said, her accent soft, and Jenna who had been afraid that she would only speak Gaelic, was relieved to find that she obviously spoke and understood English.

'You could let me go.'

The older woman snorted, 'Where would you go, I'd

like to know? Down to the clachan? They'd send you back with speed. Or would you sooner wander over the countryside until you died of hunger and cold?' She pursed her lips and shook her head 'Best stay here, miss—I wouldna help you if I could.'

'But why have I been brought here? What do they intend to do with me?'

The woman looked at her unblinkingly for a moment before opening the doors and speaking over her shoulder as she passed into the passage. 'You'd best ask Himself—he'll be away in any minute now.'

Almost on her words Jenna heard men's voices and the sounds of heavy footsteps approaching. The door was flung open and her abductors entered. Jenna saw that the men were slighter than their leader, and dark where he was red-headed. They all wore tartan trews, short jackets and large brass buttons and round flat blue hats, cocked at jaunty angles on their heads.

They were laughing as they entered, clapping each other on the shoulders and obviously well pleased with the night's work. Their high spirits enraged Jenna, who was even more annoyed when she recognised the various items they carried as having once been the cherished possessions of Nanny Frazer.

Silently she watched as the spoils were divided among them, noticing that Alex MacKenzie took nothing for himself, being contented apparently with acting as judge when a disagreement arose. The English girl was surprised by the deference paid to him by his followers, who seemed neither servile nor diffident in their manner and yet accepted his jurisdiction without question.

The matter settled to their satisfaction, they turned their attention to the food upon the table, passing a bottle round and toasting each other in the liquid it contained. Jenna's anger had been growing all this

while; first excited by all the *joie de vivre* engendered by putting a croft to the torch, then by the bland disposal of the old woman's meagre belongings and not least by the blatant ignoring of her own presence. She was not used to being ignored and her foot began to tap with anger at the lack of manners displayed by the ignorant peasants who had had the temerity to abduct her.

'I had supposed the Highlanders to have the usual manners of any gentleman,' she said clearly, 'but I see I was mistaken.'

The men stopped eating and gazed at her, their mouths full, but Alex MacKenzie did not even turn his head. With a peremptory gesture he dismissed his followers, who bolted the remainder of their meal and scrambled to their feet in their haste to obey him.

He waited until the door had closed behind them and they were alone before turning towards Jenna, his gaze inimical and cold as he examined her. 'Welcome to Tenafroich,' he said sardonically.

'Why have you brought me here?' demanded Jenna, ignoring his irony.

'That's a long story,' Alex MacKenzie said slowly, and poured more whisky into his glass, staring into the amber liquid as it caught the light. 'We have met before, Miss Winslow—nearly twenty years ago, though doubtless you have forgot the incident.'

Jenna, who had started at his revelation, looked at him more closely. 'You were the family we dispossessed,' she said at last. 'You were the boy who stared at me.'

He smiled slightly. 'I was vowing vengeance,' he told her lightly, but with an underlying depth of feeling that chilled her. 'My father reached America, but died shortly afterwards. My mother brought up my brother and myself and every day of those exiled years she

reminded us of our stolen lands and title, filling us with tales of our ancestors and love of our native land, never letting us forget our birthright. The few acres of land we had purchased were near a small village. In the course of time that village expanded and our land became valuable. We sold at a profit, and while my brother stayed in America, I came—home.'

'For vengeance, I suppose! What a laudible ambition. Your mother must be proud of you.'

Her scornful words echoed about the room. The man by the table sipped from his glass, watching her the while.

'My mother is dead.'

'Oh!—Common courtesy makes me offer my condolences, but I'm afraid she doesn't sound a very worthy woman.'

'I wonder how you would fare under similar circumstances.' His eyes travelled openly over her, taking in the ruined, unsuitable dress and her general air of dishevelment. 'Forgive me for saying so, but you don't appear to have done too well so far.'

His words reminded Jenna of the reason for her flight to Scotland and recalling the situation she had left behind, a thoughtful expression crossed her face. 'Do you play cards, Mr MacKenzie?' she asked slowly.

'Very well,' he told her. 'During the long winter evenings in the Colonies, we had very little else to do other than perfect our technique.'

'You won the Hourn Estate from my brother! Did you have him murdered too?'

He raised one eyebrow. 'I do indeed own Hourn, but then in my eyes it has always belonged to me. As for the other'—he shrugged—'think what you will.'

'You don't deny it?' she asked hotly.

'The matter holds little interest for me,' he said

indifferently. 'I won't deny that I intended to seek him out and claim restitution . . . either way the outcome has been the same.'

Jenna who had stood all this while, now felt the need to sit, and sank down upon a wooden stool beside the fire. 'Why have you brought me here?' she asked again, and for all her efforts her voice held a tremor.

Alex MacKenzie recognized her fear, and a flash of something akin to triumph or amusement showed briefly in his eyes.

'I think you know,' he replied softly, 'but I'll make the position clear if you wish. We Highlanders are a proud race, Miss Winslow. We have to return a slight or we lose face to ourselves and our clan. You and your father took my home, living like victors and bleeding my estate until it was so poor that it could not support any living thing. Many of my people have emigrated—even more have died rather than leave their homes. Do you wonder that a proud people want vengeance?'

Jenna spread her hands. 'But what can I do?' she asked. 'I am as poor as your villagers.'

'We don't wish for monetary return, we want to see you humbled as we were. In return for your years of affluence at their expense, my people want to see your spirit broken and trampled upon.'

Staring at him incredulously, Jenna lifted her chin in an unconsciously haughty gesture. 'And how, Mr MacKenzie, do you propose to do that?'

'I need a woman for my bed and board—I'll take you for both. My people will think that most suitable . . . and, indeed, so shall I.'

Jenna's eyebrows shot skywards. 'Do you propose marriage?' she gasped. 'I am sure that even in these wild, savage parts a clergyman would hesitate to marry an unwilling bride.' She laughed shortly. 'I fear you have

been too long in the Americas, associating with the Red Indian barbarians, who seem to have taught you their own uncivilised ways.'

He openly showed his amusement, his teeth gleaming in his dark face as he smiled in a way Jenna could not like. 'My dear Miss Winslow,' he said deliberately, 'who mentioned marriage?'

Speechlessly Jenna stared at him, her mouth an incredulous circle, her eyes wide with astonishment. Slowly she regained control of her features, schooling her expression into proud disdain.

'What an odd creature you are, Mr MacKenzie,' she replied coolly, only the faintest tremor in her voice. 'At times one could almost suppose you a gentleman.'

'I am what you have made me,' he answered quickly, stung by her scorn.

'Oh no,' she shook her head. 'I'd say you are entirely self-made—though perhaps your vindictive mother had some hand in forming your character.'

Alex MacKenzie looked at her silently, his expression inscrutable. 'You're no' very wise, Miss Winslow,' he said slowly. 'A woman of sense would keep her tongue between her teeth if she found herself in your position.'

She lifted her chin at the threat in his words. 'I am not afraid of a tartan colonial,' she told him, exaggerating her drawl.

The MacKenzie came to his feet, his movement deliberate. 'Then you should be,' he said quickly, a wealth of menace in his voice.

Jenna scrambled to her feet to face him across the table, suddenly afraid enough to reach out and scoop up one of the horn-handled knives from the table and brandish it. 'Take care,' she warned, 'I'll defend myself!'

The Scotsman's lip curled. 'You're safe enough at the

moment, Mistress—I like my women clean,' he said, scornfully allowing the distaste he felt to show as his gaze slowly travelled over her. Moving suddenly, he seized her shoulders before she could make use of her weapon and turned her face to the mirror that hung over the fireplace. 'Take a close look, Jenna Winslow—not only are you filthy, I'd wager that you are lousy too!'

Jenna gasped at his effrontery, opening her mouth to blast her tormentor with her rage, but catching sight of her dishevelled reflection, her lips slowly closed and her eyes widened in dismay. Lank hair hung about her shoulders in mousy elf-locks, dirty, crumpled lace edged a grimy linen shift and her once beautiful silk gown was tattered and stained. With her filthy, smutty face and hands she reminded herself of an etching by Hogarth.

'Dear God,' she breathed, seeing herself with his eyes.

The MacKenzie let her go, stepping back slightly, but continuing to hold her eyes in the dark mirror. Wrinkling his nose fastidiously, he said, 'Only a week, Miss Winslow, to bring you to such a plight, and you a civilised English lady—our women live here all their lives and don't come to such a state. Who would have thought that one of the Great Winslows could have been brought so low?'

Stung by his tone, Jenna spun to face him, her torn skirts flaring about her ankles. 'Blame the conditions under which you peasants live!' she flared. 'I am used to civilisation—not conditions that would shame an African village.'

'Mind your manners, Miss,' she was told grimly, and saw his nostrils flare white with anger. 'My people have the dirt of honest labour upon them, their clothes are stained with the sweat of their toils—they stay and face adversity, not run away and seek shelter from an old

woman too ill and poor to keep herself, let alone a useless parasite.'

Her pride shattered, Jenna turned to rage to hide her shame. 'If I'm both useless and a parasite, Mr MacKenzie, pray why have you brought me here?' she demanded. 'I would have thought that your parsimonious Scottish soul would have balked at spending your bawbees on anything without prospect of a good return.'

Gripping both her upper arms, he jerked her forward off her feet, holding her near his face as he glowered down at her. 'I'll have a good return, never fear. You'll pay me fine, woman, for every penny spent on ye.' He saw the hidden fear in her eyes and laughed. 'But not tonight—I'll bide my time until you've had a bath. I've no mind to share my bed with a flock of fleas.'



CHAPTER TWO

JENNA sat in the wooden bath and soaped herself vigorously; not even in London with her maid and her scented soaps and perfumes had she enjoyed a bath so much. Screened from the rest of the draughty kitchen by a towel draped somewhat sketchily over two chairs, with the heat from a dying fire to warm her, she luxuriated in the feel of the slightly abrasive homemade soap against her skin and scrubbed and rubbed until she was pink and clean.

Having suffered the ignominy of having her clothes removed by the housekeeper either to be burned or washed, she had accepted the other's grudging offer of night clothes with a bad grace and now scrambled out of the water, dried herself quickly and slipped the voluminous garment over her shoulders.

Alex MacKenzie had handed her over somewhat ignominiously to his housekeeper with orders that she should be made clean, and, apparently abandoning all further interest in the English girl, had retired upstairs. The housekeeper, whose name Jenna discovered was Meg Grant, had shown her a small room at the head of the stairs which was to be hers, and then set about the lengthy business of preparing a bath. A few weeks ago Jenna would have considered the mean apartment only fit for a servant, but now she thought of the narrow bed and tartan blankets with longing, finding suddenly that she had barely the strength to keep her weary eyes open.

Crossing the floor like a sleepwalker, she put out a

hand to the latch only to have the door opened against her, making her step back hastily. The neat form of Meg Grant entered, pausing at the threshold, her mouth tightening at the sight of the discarded towel in a damp heap among the soapy puddles on the floor. Crossing to the wooden tub, she gazed down at the disheartened spirals of steam still rising from the dirty water and made an impatient sound before becoming aware of Jenna standing behind her.

'If you have a bath, you empty it,' she said harshly, her brows lowered over her eyes.

Jenna raised her chin, 'Mrs Grant,' she said clearly, 'I've never emptied slops in my life.'

'Well, now's the time to begin, lassie,' retorted the housekeeper. 'I'm no' your servant and we'll have none of your hoity-toity ways here. You'll empty your water and tidy my kitchen like a civilised being—or I'll feel called upon to wake Himself.'

Jenna bit her lip at the implied threat in the older woman's voice, uneasily aware that the very last person she wished to see again that night was the red-headed Highlander.

'I'll do it in the morning,' she promised placatingly.

For answer the housekeeper blew down her nose impatiently and marched with a purposeful air to the door.

Abruptly Jenna gave in, grinding her teeth at her own cowardice. 'Oh, I'll do it,' she cried ungraciously, picking up the heavy towel. 'Where do I empty it—out the door?'

'There's a drain in the scullery. The pail I filled it with is by the fire.'

Jenna lost count of the number of times she padded across the uneven floor carrying overflowing pails of water, but soon her back ached and her feet were cold and wet. At last the bath was empty, wiped dry and

replaced on its nail by the scullery door. Hopefully she looked at Meg Grant, but was told curtly that the kitchen floor was still to do, and not until the last vestige of damp was gone did the woman nod grudgingly and allow Jenna to climb the stairs to her room.

Throwing herself on the hard bed, the English girl vowed that next day she would not give in so easily; when she was less exhausted and over the shock and fright of her abduction, she would be better able to stand up to the forceful housekeeper. Too tired to think, she fell asleep as soon as she pulled the blankets up and awoke abruptly as something landed on her feet. At first she thought she had only been asleep for a few minutes, but then saw a thin grey light was beginning to creep across the sky which she could see beyond the tiny panes of the bare window at the foot of the bed.

Sitting up, she took stock of her surroundings, taking in the plain, serviceable furniture and thinking longingly of the ornate, delicate bedroom she had left behind in London. Recalling that something had woken her, she looked at the foot of the bed and saw a bundle of clothing which had obviously been tossed there. Impelled by curiosity, she reached out and pulled it towards her, finding it consisted of underwear of the plainest kind, boasting only the narrowest of tatting by way of decoration; a blue wool bodice, a full tartan skirt and a pair of blue knitted stockings.

Jenna viewed them ruefully; after the pale silks and satins to which she was used, the clothes appeared very plain and practical, rather like the peasant costumes she had heard were worn by the common country folk in foreign countries.

Half inclined to refuse to wear them, she considered her position, her head slightly tilted as she outlined the square pattern of the brightly-coloured skirt with one

finger, deciding after some minutes reflection that she would sooner be up exploring her surroundings than lying in bed, which her captor might possibly misconstrue as an invitation.

With Jenna, to decide was to act, and flinging back the bed-clothes, she poured water from the ewer into the wide, shallow basin and washed hurriedly before dressing herself in the unfamiliar garments. The mirror of polished steel was too small to provide more than a glimpse of her costume, and she had to be content with the knowledge that her hair was twisted into a knot on top of her head, held by the few pins she still possessed, and that the dark sapphire-blue of the bodice was surprisingly flattering to her fair skin.

Not displeased with what she could see of her appearance, she left the room and went downstairs, hesitating outside the kitchen door, her heart quickening as sounds of movement carried to her. However, when she summoned the resolution to lift the latch and enter, she found only the housekeeper in occupation. Hiding her relief at the absence of the red-headed Scot, Jenna smiled calmly, bidding the other woman good morning.

Meg Grant nodded. 'I let you sleep on seeing as last night was unusual and you arrived late, but in future the Laird says you're to be down before breakfast.'

Jenna raised her eyebrows, but let the matter pass as she seated herself at the long table.

Mistress Grant glanced at her but made no move to leave the pot she was stirring. After a perceptible pause she said casually over her shoulder, 'If it's food you're wanting, there's oatcakes in the cupboard or oats to make porage in the box by the fire—or you can make brose if you've a mind.' She added more loudly, seeing the bewilderment on the girl's face, 'Put some oats in a dish and mix it with boiling water. There's honey and

milk in the larder.'

Tasting the first spoonful reluctantly, Jenna finished the bowl with enthusiasm, revelling in having a full stomach after the semi-starvation of the last few days.

'And now clear your place,' said the woman as though speaking to a child. 'When you have done your dish, there is your linen to be washed.'

Jenna looked at her steadily. 'Am I to be a servant?' she asked.

The older woman's mouth tightened. 'I wouldna' consider it servitude to look after myself—and that's all you've been asked to do so far. You, my proud lassie, would not have grown up with such an attitude of you'd been born into a good Scottish household. The mistress of our houses can turn their hands to any task and think not even the meanest job beneath her.'

Jenna's gaze was thoughtful. 'In a good English house, you would have been taught to mind your manners,' she retorted, going on in a more conciliatory tone as she realised the advisability of having a friend in the house, 'however, I dare say we all have different customs, and who's to say which is best?'

The housekeeper nodded, somewhat mollified, and to please her even further Jenna took her dish and mug and began rinsing them in a bowl of water, which seemed provided for the purpose. 'Do you run the house by yourself?' she asked over her shoulder.

'A girl does the heavy work.'

'You manage very well,' continued the English girl, a wealth of admiration in her voice. 'I would have supposed you had an army of maids under your command, the house is so well cared for.'

'It's surprising what application can do,' agreed the other, dryly. 'And just now you'd better apply yourself to refilling the kettle—you've just used the hot water I'd

poured out for you to wash your clothes in. With all our needs to be carried from the well in the yard, you'll find we use our water sparingly.'

Jenna looked down with chagrin at the crumbs floating in the water and exclaimed aloud in dismay. 'You'll learn,' Meg Grant commented, and for the first time there was a hint of something warmer in her tone.

'Where are the men?' Jenna ventured to ask some time later as she squeezed water from her freshly laundered smock and petticoats.

'Himself has ordered a fine new stallion to improve the strain, which is awful bad around here. They're away to meet the man and relieve him of the rest of the journey.'

Jenna digested this. 'When will they be back?' she asked casually.

'Well before dark,' she was told.

Turning suddenly, Jenna wiped her hands on the coarse apron she wore and caught hold of the woman's arm. 'If you will lend me money, I promise I'll pay you back as soon as I can. I only need a little—to get away to the nearest town and find work.'

'Tush, lassie, you're nothing but a loon! The nearest town is Inverness, and how would you get there? The carrier's not due for another month and you've no shoes to your feet to walk it. And what would you do when you got there?' She looked at her meaningfully. 'The only work you'd be offered wouldna' be to your liking—you'd much better stay here and have only one man. I'll grant you that he has a rage that would frighten the ancient heroes, but he's a good man and you'd look a long way and find none better.'

Jenna blushed at the other's ready knowledge of her embarrassing position and biting her lip, looked away, pretending to wring more water out of her washing.

'Swallow your pride, lassie,' the housekeeper advised roughly. 'Please the MacKenzie and you'll soon be twisting him round your little finger.'

Recalling the character and manner of Alex MacKenzie, Jenna doubted the truth of this statement, but fell silent, reviewing her position. Try how she would, she could find no way out of the situation in which she found herself, and, for the first time in her life unable to take decisive action for herself, grew frustrated and angry with her own impotence.

Much later that day, well after the two women had eaten their midday meal, the sound of hooves clattering into the yard brought them to the small kitchen window in time to see a group of men and their red-headed leader dismount quickly and turn to gaze at the grey stallion prancing in their midst. For a while all was excitement and movement as the new purchase was admired and commented upon, each individual attempting to outdo his fellows by pointing out some outstanding feature not noticed by the others. Suddenly the faces at the window were noticed and Alex MacKenzie turned a smiling face in their direction and gestured to them to join him.

Meg Grant obeyed quickly, but Jenna remained where she was, motivated both by the fact that she had no shoes to wear and by a desire to assert her independence. She saw Alex MacKenzie bend his head as the housekeeper said something to him, and then turn to gaze in the direction of the kitchen before untying a bundle from the saddle of the horse he had ridden, and beginning to cross the yard with a long, purposeful stride. Hastily leaving her vantage point, Jenna retired to the far corner of the fireplace, hiding herself in the shadows while her heart began a quick tattoo at the thought of the coming encounter.

The door opened and the MacKenzie entered, his tall figure filling the low opening as he paused, his head bent under the lintel.

'Hiding, Miss Winslow?' he asked pleasantly, and Jenna emerged from her corner with a heightened colour. 'Meg reminded me you needed shoes to view the grey devil I've just brought.' He dropped the bundle at her feet. 'Put them on and come outside,' he said easily, and left the kitchen, impatient for another sight of his new purchase.

Jenna nudged the bundle with her foot, revealing a stout pair of black shoes with bright steel buckles across the instep. As if by their own accord her feet slipped into the new shoes, finding them a surprisingly good fit, and once her feet were shod there seemed very little reason for staying indoors, especially when the sun shone and she was tired of being cooped up in the dark kitchen.

No one took any notice of her emergence, their interest still being centred upon the grey stallion showing off in their midst. Not as tall or as elegant as the horses Jenna had been used to seeing, he was thickset and sturdy, giving an impression of strength and stamina with deep shoulders and neat head.

Seeming to sense her presence without turning round, the red-headed Highlander stretched a hand for her, drawing her forward into the circle.

'What do you think of him?' he asked, a note of pride in his voice, and the English girl knew that he had forgotten for the moment that they were anything but companions.

'I presume he's one of your Highland ponies? He would not be thought of as anything great in England.'

The group around her fell silent at her words and Jenna found herself almost wishing that she had not been so disparaging about their new toy,

but felt impelled to continue, her voice high and clear.

'If he were not so small, he would resemble nothing so much as a cross between a hack and a coster's cart horse.'

Alex MacKenzie looked down at her. 'And who are you, Miss Winslow, to set yourself up as a judge of horseflesh?' he asked. 'If you had any sense, you'd realise that a namby-pamby animal which might suit a rider in London's parks, would be of no use what so ever in this country. Our horses are ridden for hours across wild mountains—not shown off for half an hour on smooth lawns.'

'You asked me what I thought of him—I told you.'

'And learned how wrong were your ideas.' Taking her arm he lead her nearer the restive animal. 'I'll show you the points to look for, and in future you'll not show your ignorance.'

For the next few minutes Jenna was the unwilling recipient of a tirade on horseflesh, forced to listen to a lecture on the good points, which seemed never-ending, until against her will, her attention was caught and she found herself listening to the quiet voice with unexpected interest.

'Well, away with you just now,' he said at last, and she realised that he had been eulogising to himself as much as to her. 'You've just time to put the meal on the table while we see to the horses.'

Leaving her, he strode off and Jenna felt a light touch on her arm. Turning she found Mrs Grant beside her and shook her head.

'I won't act as a servant,' she told her defiantly. The other woman shrugged.

'You'd best tell him that yourself,' she commented. 'In the meantime come into the house.'

Allowing the sense of the suggestion, Jenna followed

her into the kitchen, which now seemed full of the smell of mutton broth, simmering over the fire. She paused uncertainly as the housekeeper went about her business, and eventually wandered through into the parlour. The fire had been laid and wanted only a flame to be put to it. The tinder-box lay ready, and Jenna found herself rubbing her cold hands and wishing she could deal with the mysteries of the metal box and its flint.

The light was leaving the autumn day and already the room was growing dim. At last she heard more voices in the kitchen, loud and pleased with their day's work, and expected to be joined by Alex MacKenzie, but she still had several minutes to want until the door opened and he walked in.

'Losh, woman, hadn't you the sense to light the fire?' he wondered.

'I don't know how,' she told him, lifting her chin.

'Then it's high time you did—but even if the tinder-box was too difficult for your tender fingers, you could have got a taper lit from the kitchen fire. But now come and watch, and I'll show you how to get a light.'

Reluctantly Jenna moved slightly nearer the fire, watching his strong, brown fingers striking a spark from the flint until the dry tinder caught, and then blowing it into a flame before applying it to the kindling in the fireplace. Bright blue eyes looked up at her as she knelt on the hearth.

'Next time,' he said, 'I expect you to do it.'

Feeling that the time for a confrontation had arrived, Jenna lifted her head. 'I am neither a servant nor yet a slave,' she told him proudly.

The tall Highlander rose to his feet. 'You are whatever I choose to make you,' he answered slowly.

Jenna shook her head. 'Oh no. I am a free born English woman and decide my own future.'

One long stride brought him uncomfortably near, and before she could move away his hands were heavy on her shoulders, giving her a disagreeable feeling of being held prisoner.

'I must make some things clear, Miss Winslow,' he said easily. 'You have no money, no means of obtaining any, and while our braw Highland lassies could walk to the nearest town, you have been reared as a frail female and are much too delicate to manage anything so robust.' He ran a disparaging eye over her slender form. 'I doubt if those dainty feet could carry you as far as the main road, let alone the miles to Inverness . . . besides which, in this remote corner there is no law but in me, despite the arrangements made for a legal system by your government who hoped to depose the old clan system. You, Jenna Winslow, are totally in my power, to do with as I wish, and you would be wiser to accept the situation.'

'Do you really think I'll stay here?' she demanded, her voice quick and low. 'You'll have to tie me hand and foot—'

'I might do precisely that—but have you never heard of the *Sabine women*?' The grip on her shoulders changed, became less firm and almost a caress as his thumbs smoothed her skin above the edge of her shift. 'Women seem to have a liking for their abductors.'

Jenna stepped back, sweeping his hands away with a violent gesture. 'Not I,' she said, with a cutting edge to her voice. 'You'll find me no easily-tamed miss to do your bidding.'

At once he followed her, taking the same grip of her shoulders as before, but this time he allowed her to feel his strength, his fingers biting through her clothes.

'It's time we came to an agreement,' he said, jerking her closer. 'Stay here you will, have no doubts as to that.'

Your so-called education has fitted you for nothing save acting the part of a fine lady. Well, here, miss, that is reckoned a pretty poor and useless creature. If you are wise you'll allow Mrs Grant to instruct you in the ways of running a house and take advantage of her teaching to become a useful woman. In the meantime you'll act the part of a serving-wench, and obey her—'

'I will not!'

Bending his tall back, he lowered his head to hold her gaze with his. 'Believe me you will, Miss Winslow. Those who don't work, don't eat. A little hunger will soon make you wonderfully obedient, Jenna.'

The familiarity with which he used her name was an insult, and the English girl reacted as he had known she would.

'I have not given you permission—how dare you use my name!'

Smiling, he leaned even closer. 'What a silly lass you are. Haven't you realised yet that I have no need of your permission for anything? I dāre anything and take what I want—Jenna. As you'll soon find out!'

His fingers bit cruelly, dragging her against his chest with a force that made her gasp. Releasing her momentarily as he changed his grip, he imprisoned her with one arm, tilting up her chin with his free hand. For a second he stared down into her eyes, reading the fear and anger there, before, with a smothered exclamation of triumph, his mouth closed over hers.

The kiss was hard and deliberately cruel, bruising her mouth, his teeth cutting her lip as he let her feel his strength and passion. At last it was over and he released her, but not before his hand had dropped to the edge of her bodice, caressing the gentle hollow between her breasts before she could twist free. The final outrage was too much, and with wild rage, Jenna stepped quickly

forward again lifting her arm to hit the face above her with all the strength she could command.

The violent crack of the fingers against the cheek echoed about the room and Alex MacKenzie rocked back on his feet, more surprised than hurt, but with a bright weal already developing high on his lean cheek-bone.

'I'll allow you to strike me once,' he said quietly, 'but try another blow and I'll return it with interest!'

Jenna shivered at the underlying menace in his voice. 'Let me tell you, sir, that you are no gentleman,' she retorted bravely. 'To force your attentions upon an unwilling lady is not the act of an honourable man.'

'By what right do you question my honour? I can trace my ancestry back to the Earls of Ross. I doubt if you know your own grandfather.'

'I was talking of gentlemanly behaviour, not of the accident of one's birth—however, I quite see that to expect you to have been brought up to protect weaker beings would be too much. From what I have heard, I am sure your mother would have taught you to use your superior strength to the best advantage. You are a bully, Mr Mackenzie!'

As her words died away, Jenna waited with apprehension for the storm to break. Instead, to her surprise, she saw something like amusement appear briefly on the face above her.

'And you, I begin to fear, are a shrew,' he remarked as the door behind them opened and the housekeeper came in bearing a large china tureen, which she put down on the table. 'That smells good, Meg,' he went on, moving to the table and lifting the lid to sniff appreciatively.

'Come to the table, Jenna,' he ordered quietly, yet with a distinct note that warned her not to disobey, as the

other woman left the room. 'Oh yes,' he went on dryly, 'I know full well, you think it a liberty I take with your name and us never introduced, but I do it to make you understand your position.' He paused while ladling stew onto her plate, and did not speak again until they were both ready to eat. 'If you stay here, Jenna, it'll not be the only one I take.'

Jenna's eyes flew to his face, his deliberate words filling her with dismay and renewing the apprehension she had tried to subdue since she first heard the approaching horses the previous day.

'You'll be my woman in the fullest sense.' He watched her dismay sardonically, a wintery smile on his lips. 'You're a woman of the world—what did you expect?' he asked.

'A—a little time—' she murmured, clasping her hands together in her lap.

Almost reflectively, he shook his head slowly. 'I am a normal man, with the usual desires and have no wish for a platonic relationship—'

'You wish to humiliate me!' cried the girl.

His eyebrows rose. 'If you like,' he answered easily. 'If it will help your sensibilities, remember that many matches are arranged shortly before the nuptials take place.'

'You are taking a mistress, not a wife,' Jenna challenged, her eyes wide.

'Yes.' The blue eyes were hard and steady forcing Jenna to drop her own gaze as a fierce tide of red flooded her face and neck, dyeing her pale skin. With an inarticulate murmur she hid her burning face in both her hands, feeling hot tears sting her eyelids.

'You are cruel—cruel,' she murmured.

'Perhaps. But at least I offer you a home and position. I could take you and throw you out. Be sensible, Jenna,

make the best of the situation. If you please me, I promise you'll not find me unkind.'

Rage and fear fought for supremacy in Jenna. Only by a great effort did she remain seated at the table with an outward semblance of calm, belying her inward turmoil, while her spirit revolted at the condescension in his speech. Subduing her pride, she hung her head and thanked him meekly, asking only that she be allowed a little time alone and offering to help Mrs Grant wash up after the meal.

'You have eaten nothing,' Alex MacKenzie pointed out. 'At least drink some wine.' Without waiting for her consent, he poured red liquid into her glass.

Mindful of the vague plan forming in her mind, Jenna accepted the stimulant, uneasily aware of the man opposite. Looking up at last, she caught his eyes upon her, intent, with speculation in their depths, and she realised nervously that deceiving him would not be as easy as she had first supposed.

'Take heed, Jenna Winslow,' he said slowly. 'I am determined to have you tonight.'

A shiver slid down her spine and two spots of hectic colour flamed high on her cheekbones. 'La, sir,' she sighed, 'need you be so frank? A little subterfuge would spare my blushes.'

'I had not thought you so delicate.'

'You see,' she went on ingenuously, 'I have never found myself in precisely this situation before, and to tell the truth, I must own to a little maidenly nervousness.' She raised her eyes and allowed him to see the very real fear in there. 'You are so very big—and fierce, totally unknown to me—and have treated me in a cavalier fashion. If you could allow me a little time to become used to the idea, just a few hours to come to terms with what must be—?'

There was a silence while she looked at him hopefully, waiting breathlessly to hear whether her wild plan had a chance of succeeding or not.

'Very well,' he said after a while. 'You may have your few hours without my company.'

She thanked him simply, knowing that more profuse gratitude would arouse his suspicions, and quickly replaced the plates and tureen on the large tray left by Mrs Grant and hastened to the door. Somewhat to her surprise, the Highlander rose to his feet and held the door for her with a gallant bow. Summoning up all her resources she smiled sweetly in return, lowering her lids in case he should read the scorn in her eyes.

As soon as the door was closed behind her, she silently placed the tray on a nearby chest and crept to the door at the end of the passage which she knew gave on to the courtyard. A large tartan plaid had been flung carelessly over a hook, and snatching it up, she wrapped it about her shoulders before cautiously opening the heavy door. For a moment she thought it was locked and her heart fell, but a quick examination showed that a bolt high up had been drawn, and once this was released it was the work of a moment before she was stepping out into the dark night.

Hesitating only a second, she crossed the yard, having decided already that the path by which she had arrived would serve no purpose, leading as it did only back to the castle and the village. However, when she had joined the group about the horse earlier that day, she had seen a track leading off into the hills, and that was the way she intended to go. Only fear and desperation drove her to take such an action, knowing that the chances of her finding shelter were very few, but even the thought of dying in the unknown was preferable to the fate offered her by the Laird of the MacKenzies.



CHAPTER THREE

THE house had felt pleasantly warm, but once the sheltered courtyard had been left behind, the wind took Jenna's breath away with the cold, reminding her that in the Highlands once summer was past, winter came quickly.

An icy rain was falling, and as the wind snatched at her skirts, she saw with dismay that a few snowflakes were scattered in among the sleet. The rough track climbed steeply, and before the lights of the house were lost to view, Jenna's fingers were already nipped with cold and her stockings wet and coated in mud. Pausing for breath, she glanced below, contemplating the warmth and security from the elements which the house presented before she turned on her heel, and resolutely continued on her way.

The night was so dark that she could hardly see a pace in front of her, taking each step forward almost blindly, feeling her way over the rough ground and boulders. The middle of the track was a muddy stream bordered by loose stones and gravel, while without the low stone wall on either side she would have wandered from the path before she had gone a few hundred yards. All her life Jenna had been cossetted and cared for; never had she been out alone at night before and never had she battled with nature, viewing the less kind elements from the comfort of a coach, if a journey was necessary.

Soon she was wet through, the plaid which she had taken for protection icy cold and as manageable as a

soaked horseblanket. She was half inclined to release her hold on the frozen, stubborn folds, but realised that she had need of its cover and stumbled on, never more miserable in her life. Several times she fell, each time requiring more effort and willpower to rise, while the thought of the house she had left became more desirable and her actions more foolish.

The wind and the cold told upon her strength, and slowly she realised that the prospect of dying on the mountain was very real. The thought stirred her numb brain, and calling upon all her failing resources, she determined not to give up despite her longing for rest. She was reeling with exhaustion, only her spirit keeping her on her feet when she stumbled against a solid object. Her frozen fingers took some time to tell her it was a door, and when she encountered a metal latch her tired brain could hardly accept the fact that she had found shelter.

For a despairing moment she thought the door was locked, but at last her nearly useless hand managed to lift the latch and she fell inside. The sensation of peace after the wild buffeting of the wind and rain was pure bliss, and for a while she knelt just beyond the threshold. At last she managed to regain her feet, and closing the door behind her, called timidly to possible occupants, although her instinct told her that the house was empty.

The interior was even darker than the night outside, a velvety blackness making her feel as though blindfolded. With both hands outstretched before her she felt her way slowly forward, encountering first a table and then the far wall.

Turning, she fell over a small object that caught her below the knee. Stunned by the noise and almost too tired and cold to move, she abandoned her attempt to explore her surroundings and crouching against the wall,

decided to wait for morning. No sooner had she wiped the rain from her face with the corner of the plaid, wringing the water out of its woollen folds as best she could, than sounds of movement outside brought her to her knees, waiting like a frightened animal while someone approached its lair.

Her straining ears picked up the sound of footsteps against the rocks that strewed the path, and then a hand scraped against the latch and while she thrust a hand into her mouth to stifle her frightened cry, the door opened and someone entered. For a moment his silhouette was black against the lighter opening and then the door was thrust closed behind him.

All was dark for a second, while Jenna crouched in the corner, too afraid to move, then the figure produced a lantern from under the protecting folds of his plaid and walking confidently forward as though well acquainted with his surroundings, placed it on the table.

'Jenna,' he said questioningly, 'Jenna?'

Suddenly he saw her huddled against the wall, her eyes huge and frightened above the hands that covered her mouth. Swiftly crossing the room, Alex MacKenzie knelt beside her, his face concerned, and crying with her relief, Jenna flung herself on the chest of her enemy, clinging to him with all her remaining strength.

'Softly, softly,' he soothed, gathering her to him and speaking gently as he would have to a nervous animal. 'Lord, but you're wet and near frozen.'

As soon as she had grown a little calmer, he disentangled himself and went to the fireplace. Soon a flame rewarded his efforts, and quickly others were licking at the peat turfs carefully arranged in a pyramid. While the fire was taking hold, the Highlander turned back to the girl, who was shivering uncontrollably and almost unconscious from cold and exhaustion.

His first action was to strip away the enveloping plaid, dropping it on the floor near the fire, and then remove her wet clothing, ignoring her faint protests. Wrapping her in a rough blanket from the box-bed built into one wall, he rubbed her vigorously, bringing life and warmth back to her frozen limbs.

Jenna's teeth stopped chattering and gradually her strength returned, until at last she was aware of her surroundings and of what was happening.

'Mr MacKenzie,' she protested, 'this is hardly proper!'

The Scotsman laughed briefly at the note of indignation in her voice, but did not abate his administrations. 'Under the circumstances, there was little else to be done—you'll have to forgive me the liberty.'

Leaving her, he took armfuls of dried heather from the bed and spread it in front of the fire, then set her down in the midst of the aromatic heap.

Half-asleep, Jenna watched as he placed water to boil, his tall figure dark against the glowing turf. Warm and comfortable, her tingling limbs reminded her of the feel of his hands upon her and she was grateful for the dim light that hid her blushes.

At last he turned and carrying a small, steaming bowl came towards her. Lifting her against his shoulder, he began spooning the hot substance into her mouth, taking it for granted that she was still too weak to feed herself. In reality Jenna's strength was rapidly returning, but the sensation of being helpless and nursed like a child was so pleasant that she accepted his ministrations with enjoyment.

'Brose,' he explained as she hesitated a little over the first spoonful, 'with a drop of the water of life, added purely for medicinal purposes.'

After she had eaten Jenna was content to lean back against the Highlander's chest lulled by the steady

rhythm of his heartbeat. Her heavy eyelids drooped, and before he had put down the dish, she was asleep.

Some time later she awoke, disturbed by a new and fiercer onslaught of the storm. For a moment she lay gazing at the glowing heat of the fire, feeling languorous and secure. Flexing her toes, she stretched contentedly and at once became aware of her naked state under the rough covering. At the same moment she realised that she was not alone; she was cradled against another body and an arm was firmly round her waist. Catching her breath, she made a startled, convulsive movement and the arm tightened.

'Be still—you are quite safe, lassie,' she was told quietly, and as she recognised the voice of Alex MacKenzie the memory of the preceding events came flooding back.

'They'll wonder where we are,' she said.

'Not they—I've been away in worse weather than this.'

She wondered at the note of amusement in his voice, but as he seemed disinclined to share the joke with her, went on after a pause, 'What is this place—whose is it?'

'Mine. It's an old bothy I keep dry and supplied with essentials. It's useful in bad weather, or when we can't get down the path . . . or as happened last night.'

Jenna was silent, and almost absentmindedly his finger began to stroke her neck, first smoothing back the tendrils of hair that clustered about her ear and gradually sinking lower to the curve of her shoulder. Her breath caught and grew ragged as the covering blanket fell away and she made a quick movement to recover it, only to have her hand taken and held.

Raising himself on one elbow Alex MacKenzie leaned over her, the firelight gleaming on the lean planes of his high-cheeked face and striking an answering colour from

the red hair that had escaped from the confines of the black ribbon that usually held it back.

'Jenna, Jenna,' he murmured. 'You are very desirable.'

Before she could answer his mouth had closed over hers, his lips gentle, at first almost questioning, before growing more demanding as he sensed her response. Unimpeded by clothing, his hands caressed and aroused, filling her with unexpected delight. Surprised by her own response, she tried to draw back, murmuring a protest against his mouth, pushing against his chest with both her hands. His kiss became deeper, his hands more exciting, and carried along by his experienced lovemaking, Jenna had a fleeting moment of fear and dismay before she was swept away on a tide of passion that was not to be denied.

When she awoke a second time, she knew at once where she was and what had happened.

Opening her eyes, she found that her companion was awake and looking down at her, his expression inscrutable. As she met his eyes a bright flush of crimson washed over her skin, and she hastily lowered her gaze.

Taking her hand he carried it to his lips. 'I thought to find a woman of the world—I did not expect you to be innocent,' he said gently.

Jenna refused to meet his gaze. 'Would it have made any difference?' she asked dryly.

She felt him laugh a little at her forthrightness. 'I expect not,' he told her honestly, and turning her face to meet his, kissed her soundly. 'Now you're mine, lassie, you'll no' be so keen to run away.'

Finding courage, Jenna raised her eyes to study him, puzzled by her own feelings. She had heard that a woman's first lover claimed an especial position in her life, and to her surprise found that instead of disliking

Alex MacKenzie more after his act of seduction, in fact her feelings towards him were kinder. He had been a considerate lover, and she realised that he was far from the brute she had supposed him to be. Perhaps life with him would not be so bad after all.

Watching the fleeting expressions as they crossed her features the Scotsman toyed with her hand he still held and waited for an answer. The touch of his lips against her fingertips sent a tingle of returning excitement down Jenna's back, and she shivered delightfully as his breath warmed her palm.

'Well?' he demanded, aware of the effect his actions were having upon her.

'We—might deal well together,' she suggested tentatively. He laughed into her eyes and she was lost. 'T-there's more truth in this tale of the Sabine woman than one s-supposes,' she said, blushing rosily, and certain of her acquiescence, he swept her triumphantly into a tight embrace.

Having breakfasted on the remains of the stock of oatmeal, they swept the ashes into the fireplace and left the tiny shelter, but when Jenna would have taken the way she had come the night before, Alex stopped her with a hand on her arm.

'I have business,' he said. 'We'll go another way—it'll give you an idea of the lie of the land. The sooner you know your way around the safer it will be,' and he led her beyond the end of the croft house to where the track turned away to cross the wild moor-like country that covered the mountain slopes.

After the wild night the morning was surprisingly calm and gentle, with only the damp brown heather and thick mud between puddles to show for the passed storm. At first Jenna tried to keep her newly-dried shoes out of the

damp, but finding this impossible, soon gave up and splashed through the water with as little care as her companion. Quickly her stockings and skirts were wet to the knees, and the morning lost some of its delight. With little regard for her, Alex MacKenzie plunged ahead, pausing at last on a low ridge, silhouetted against the sky as he looked down. Turning at Jenna's approach, he reached a hand for her and tucked her in against his side.

'Craigdarroch,' he said, with a pride in his voice and following his pointing finger she recognised the cluster of tiny dwellings, huddled together at the foot of the mountain, sheltered by a group of oak trees.

Slow columns of smoke drifted skywards from the low, heather-thatched roofs, but of the inhabitants there was no sign. Jenna gazed down at the bleak, desolate scene, and involuntarily shivered, struck with dismay at the prospect of spending the rest of her life in such inhospitable surroundings.

The man beside her sighed with pleasure. 'I never grow tired of the sight,' he said, and after a moment longer turned away to resume the path downwards springing lightly from boulder to boulder and tussock to tussock with never a thought for Jenna following more cautiously. Reaching a fast-flowing burn at the base of the mountain, he turned to look for her, frowning impatiently on finding her still carefully negotiating the rough path.

Unaware of his impatience, Jenna continued downward, concentrating on each step, her skirts held high above the mud and damp heather. At last she reached the bottom and at once was seized and carried across the rushing water to be deposited, none too gently, on the other side. Somewhat ruffled by such treatment, she settled her skirts and straightened the plaid about her

shoulders. She was not at all sure she cared for the feeling of helplessness engendered by the Highlander's action.

Deciding to make her feelings known she took a breath and looked up, only to find her companion already some yards distant, whistling cheerfully and seemingly oblivious of either her presence or displeasure.

As she watched he rounded a bend and was lost to sight behind a curve of the rocky mountain wall. With a feeling of dismay almost mounting to fear, Jenna realised that she had no idea of the way back to the house, and picking up her skirt ran after him, tripping and stumbling in her haste.

'Don't get left behind,' he said without looking round as she drew level. 'You could easily get lost—if you avoided falling in a bog or down a precipice, you could wander for days until cold and exhaustion overcame you.'

Jenna's heart fluttered unpleasantly. 'Bog?' she repeated. 'P-precipice?'

'Oh, aye,' her companion agreed casually. 'We have them both.'

'And cannibals and headhunters, I suppose?' challenged Jenna, stung by his tone.

The glance he flung at her over his shoulder was thoughtful. 'In the Gaelic, Miss Winslow, Sassenach means barbarian,' he said and marched on leaving the English girl searching for a suitable reply.

Ignoring the towering mountains crowding near the path, she followed on his heels, head bent as she searched for a crushing retort and so did not notice that they were approaching a low stone cottage until a woman of about her own age ran out to greet Alex MacKenzie with a glad cry. Seeing her, the other

paused, the greeting dying in her lips as she looked at the man questioningly.

With a hand on her arm, he drew her to one side and bending his head to hers, spoke quickly in Gaelic. There was an intimacy about the pose that Jenna resented, and when they both smiled and turned to look at her she demanded quickly to be told what had been said.

'It was your circumstances I was explaining,' she was told gravely, but a certain amusement in his voice made her flush angrily.

Lifting her chin she scrutinised the other woman. 'Make your—friend—known to me.'

'Certainly, this is Morag Frazer. If you have need of simples or physics, then she is the one you should be visiting.'

Jenna's eyes travelled from the bare brown feet firmly anchored in the mud past the full tartan skirt and plain bodice to the tangled, wind-blown hair. At last she examined the wild beauty of the face, taking in the sparkling black eyes above the strong nose and the generous mouth which at that moment bore a proud expression with more than a hint of contempt as she returned the Englishwoman's gaze.

'I enjoy very good health,' she said clearly. Morag said something quickly in Gaelic, laughing up at the red-haired man as she did so. 'What did she say?' demanded Jenna.

'Just that I will be alone when I come,' she was told and this time he made no attempt to hide his amusement.

Suddenly Jenna was struck by the impropriety of the scene, with very little idea of how or why she and the Scotswoman seemed to be sparring together like animals over a coveted prize—and Alex MacKenzie gave the impression of enjoying the match. Standing to one side,

watching them, he reminded her forcibly of a magnificent bantam she had once seen standing on top of a fence, while his henfolk fought over the scraps thrown to them. The force of the simile came to her abruptly and she caught her breath, enlightenment making her stare from the man to the woman. That which she read in their faces made her own face flame as she backed away, before she brushed past them and walked on along the path, her head held high.

Only her pride prevented her from running from the humiliating scene, but even so she was almost blinded by tears of rage. Quickening her step as a voice called her name, she hurried on heedless of the direction, only intent upon putting as much distance between herself and her tormentors as possible. Suddenly her arm was taken from behind and she swung round.

'You're going the wrong way, lassie.'

'Let me go! How dare you touch me!' she cried, trying to shake herself free. 'You planned that, you s-savage.'

Alex MacKenzie looked down at her, his eyebrows in a thin line. 'Not exactly. I had need of one of Morag's cures and thought to get it.'

Jenna stamped her foot. 'With never so much as a thought of humiliating me, I suppose?' Her lip curled as she stared up at the handsome face above her. 'You disgust me, Alex MacKenzie—to flaunt your latest seduction before your cast-off mistress is something only the lowest rake would do.'

'What makes you think she's cast-off?' he said, growing pale with anger himself.

'You have no more honour than the vilest toad under a stone! Because you own a few mingy acres and hold sway over a handful of miserable, half-civilised people you have the gall to call yourself a gentleman! You have no more idea of how a gentleman should behave than a

native from darkest Africa.'

'Have a care to your tongue, woman,' he said between gritted teeth, and, tightening his grip on her wrist, began to walk briskly along the road, dragging her willy-nilly behind him.

Jenna tried to pry loose the strong brown fingers that encircled her arm, but without success. Such was the speed of the Highlander that she had difficulty in keeping her feet as she was towed over boulders and loose stones that littered the track. Once she fell to her knees, but Alex MacKenzie only paused to drag her upright, and plunged on, his mouth a tight line of anger.

'You are going too fast,' wailed Jenna, beating upon his back with her free hand. 'Where are you taking me?'

'Since you chose to criticise my manners, I am taking you to Craigdarroch, to introduce you to my kinsmen there,' he told her curtly, with no perceptible slackening of his pace.

The full implication of his proposal struck her. 'Oh, no, MacKenzie—please no!' she cried, and tried to dig her heels in.

Her protest and action had as little effect as those of a wayward animal would have done, and a feeling of frustrated helplessness overwhelmed her. The first scattered homesteads came into view and a few tattered children appeared at their approach. A curt command was spoken and the children charged importantly ahead, shouting noisily and running in at open doors to bring the adults out on to the wide road between the few houses which formed the village proper.

A slight rise surmounted by a flat-topped boulder formed a natural focal point and reaching this spot, Alex MacKenzie thrust Jenna up on to the rock and turned to face his people. She could not understand one word of his impassioned speech but the meaning was abundantly

clear, making her flush with embarrassment as she became the object of all eyes. If, looking at the upturned faces, she had expected to see pity, she was mistaken. The expressions ranged from dislike to something akin to hatred. Nowhere could she see even a spark of kindness, and she drew the edges of her plaid about her as much for protection from the concerted, malevolent gaze as against the biting cold.

At last the man below her fell silent and the watchers broke into a babble of speech, surging forward to the base of Jenna's boulder. Suddenly the tall Scotsman leaped up beside her, and encouraged by his countrymen took her roughly in his arms. Knowing better than to struggle, Jenna received his kiss rigid with distaste, the jeering applause of the onlookers ringing in her ears. At last he raised his head and she drew a shaking hand across her bruised mouth. Trembling with suppressed fury, she ignored his proffered hand and scrambled down unaided from the rock.

With burning cheeks and head held high, she marched from the scene, unaware that the crofters parted before her only on command of their chieftain. Once more she picked up her skirts, eager to leave Alex MacKenzie far behind, but this time there was no shout and hand to hold her back. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw the villagers watching her silently, the Laird heading the ragged group. The wind stirred their clothes, fluttering ragged plaids and unkempt hair while their owners stood still, their attitude grimly menacing. Involuntarily her pace quickened, and Jenna was thankful when a bend in the road hid her from the unfriendly watchers.

Not even to herself would the English girl admit that she had been frightened by the animosity evident in Craigdarroch, but as her fear grew less so her anger mounted, and wild plans for revenge began to form in

her brain. As she turned off the main road and neared the house she had left so precipitously the night before, the perfect means of revenge presented itself. Gasping at its simplicity, she hurried on, eager to put it into effect.

The courtyard was empty, a glance at the windows of the house told her that no one was watching and she crossed quickly to the far end where the new stallion was housed. At her approach his head appeared over the stable door, his ears set back and his eyes narrowed wickedly. To her relief he was not tethered and she had only to unlatch the door and step back as he plunged past, eager for his freedom. The action took less than a moment and was done almost without consideration; only after the horse had galloped over the cobbles and out of sight did she pause to think what might be the outcome.

Hard hooves clattered over the cobblestones, the horse paused fractionally, tossed his head, and with a loud and defiant neigh charged out into the inviting open countryside. While the speed of his passing still disturbed the atmosphere Alex MacKenzie arrived, to be met by his men who had heard the noise of the stallion's escape. For a moment all was confusion, the men babbling question and answer and even peering into the empty stables as if in hopes of finding the horse magically returned.

Suddenly the MacKenzie turned on Jenna. 'How was the animal after escaping?' he asked, almost forgetting his English in the stress of the moment.

Jenna took a deep breath and faced him defiantly. 'I let him out,' she said clearly.

There was a moment's silence, then those who could understand English translated for the benefit of those who could not, while Alex MacKenzie's amazement

gave way to white rage.

'Dear God,' thought Jenna, 'he's going to kill me,' and while all her instincts bade her shrink away, she squared her shoulders and returned his gaze unflinchingly.

Alex MacKenzie hit her with the back of his open hand, the force of the blow catching her across the cheekbone with all his strength, lifting her off her feet to send her flying against the stable wall. For a moment she lay like a discarded doll, before, still dazed, she was seized and flung roughly into the stable and the door slammed behind her.

Jenna landed on her knees, hands outspread in an instinctive gesture to protect her head and face, but even so her impetus propelled her into the far corner of the dark shelter. She lay, disorientated, her head ringing from the unexpected blow until she became aware of her surroundings. She sat up slowly and looked about to take stock of the situation in which she found herself.

The door stood firm against her endeavours to open it, while the gaps above and below were both too small to provide means of escape. Her cheek throbbed angrily, and putting up a tentative hand she found a painful swelling already forming. Stroking it tenderly, she upended a pail and sat down, tucking her skirt about her feet against the cold which was beginning to make itself felt; by the silence outside it appeared that everyone was searching for the horse, and she judged that her incarceration was likely to be a lengthy one.



CHAPTER FOUR

THE hours passed slowly, giving the English girl time for many bitter thoughts. Like most women of her class she was unused to physical violence and found that she had no liking for such treatment; far from intimidating her, she felt a steady, growing rage and an overwhelming desire to best the red-headed Highlander. The whole side of her face was painful and she had a horrid suspicion that her eye was rapidly closing.

Gently fingering her bruise, she reflected on the iniquity of man. For a few hours she had thought that Alex MacKenzie might prove to be the man she could love. Handsome and undoubtably brave, there had been something about his arrogance and bravado that had called to her own proud spirit. But his subsequent actions had destroyed any hope she might have had that he felt any kindness towards her. Bitterly she reflected that his gentleness and consideration as a lover had been merely a means of seduction, and that the humility and pain he had later heaped on her were proof of his true feelings.

Suddenly the sound of footsteps outside roused her, and applying an eye to a crack in the door, she saw the neat form of the housekeeper crossing the yard.

'Mrs Grant—Mrs Grant,' she called urgently and saw her hesitate and turn in the direction of the stable. 'I'm here—please come over. Don't go in.'

With growing excitement she saw the other approach

and rattled the door impatiently. 'Let me out,' she demanded.

The older woman shook her head. 'I dare not,' she answered simply, and prepared to move away.

'When will they be back?' Jenna asked quickly.

Meg Grant gave the door a significant glance. 'When they're after finding the horse, I suppose,' she answered.

'They might be away for days,' wailed the girl.

'Perhaps,' the housekeeper agreed indifferently, intimating that she felt Jenna was responsible for the plight in which she found herself.

'At least get me something to eat and drink.'

Mrs Grant considered, nodding at last before walking back to her kitchen to return a few minutes later with a mug and two thin oatcakes which she thrust through the ragged gap at the bottom of the door. Without acknowledging Jenna's thanks she hurried away, and the house door closed decisively while the English girl was still examining her meagre supper.

Jenna had hoped that the mug might contain milk, but the housekeeper proved to have only provided ale. Wrinkling her nose over the sparse meal, Jenna retired to the bank of straw in the corner to eat. She had disposed of the oatcakes and was sipping the ale, more from necessity than from liking, when she became aware of a stealthy rustling and movement around her in the growing dusk. At her movement all grew still, but after a while the sounds began again while she waited, tense and watchful.

Suddenly she could distinguish several pairs of small eyes, while low, dark shapes slunk and scurried about the earth floor at the base of the walls. Recognition dawned, and Jenna leaped to her feet with a shriek compounded of disgust and fright. The mug dropped unheeded to the ground and bounced and rolled into a

corner, as she ran to the door and pounded upon it with her clenched fists.

'Let me out! Let me out!' she cried. 'There are rats in here.'

No one appeared in response to her calls and she was forced to realise that Mrs Grant either could not hear or would not answer her plea for help; once again she was thrown back on her own resources. The short autumn day was drawing to an end, filling the courtyard with grey dusk and the outbuildings and corners with dark shadows. She knew soon the stable behind her would be filled with impenetrable blackness, and knew also that she could not face the night enclosed in that rat-infested prison.

Calling upon every vestige of self-control she turned away from the door and examined the small space with an eye to escape, while the hair on the nape of her neck rose as she forced herself to ignore the scrutiny from the many small eyes that watched her.

The roof was made out of turf, thatched with heather, and above the door there seemed to be an opening through which she could see the lighter sky. Although the stone walls were old and rough they were still stout, the mortar that bonded them strong and firm. Another brief examination told Jenna that the only possible way out appeared to be through the roof, and after some consideration she placed the upturned pail beside the door, climbed up, and using the latch as a toe-hold, managed to scramble up and cling to the top of the wall. Balanced precariously on one foot, she reached up to the roof and pushed at the crumbling turfs.

They were wedged more strongly than she had supposed, but with an effort she managed to push some free, hearing them fall to the ground outside with a satisfying thud. More followed quickly, and with a

supreme effort, she dragged herself on to the top of the wall and, wriggling between the rough tree branches which served for roof beams, scrambled out on to the prickly heather thatching—just as Alex MacKenzie galloped into the courtyard, closely followed by two of his minions.

Almost at once he became aware of the figure on the roof. With a smothered oath, he edged his unbridled mount nearer to the stable. Looking down, Jenna saw his brown fingers clenched into the black mane as he controlled the animal without the aid of either reins or saddle. For a moment the Highlander and Jenna viewed each other silently, no kindly expression on either of their faces.

The MacKenzie spoke first. 'Come down,' he said quietly, 'I've a mind to beat some sense into you.'

Either the icy voice or the chill night struck cold into Jenna, and she shivered as she shuffled back from the edge of the roof, slithering up until she reached the apex and pausing momentarily on the highest point. Never before had she felt actual fear of another human, but now the figure below had so menacing an air that her heart fluttered nervously and her hands grew damp and clammy.

'Do as I say, wench, or it will be the worse for you,' and he reached up to seize her ankle.

Hastily Jenna withdrew her feet, as the Scotsman's actions galvanised her into movement. Slipping and clawing, she cursed her voluminous skirts that impeded her, and at last managed to swing her legs over the other side of the roof. The ground dropped away unexpectedly, but aware of what awaited her at the hands of the irate Highlander, Jenna closed her eyes and allowed herself to slide down the slope.

Her skirt caught on some projection, with the result

that she spun round to fall head-first. With a cry of fright she put out her hands and landed heavily among dead bracken and grass tussocks.

A fierce pain burned through her shoulder, and closing her eyes she lay still, trying to smother the whimpers threatening to break from her. Footsteps thudded over the turf and she shrank back, resolutely keeping her eyes closed.

'Don't touch me—I think my arm is broken,' she said as hands reached down for her.

Without a word the hands changed direction, feeling along her arm with surprising gentleness, pausing at her shoulder as she was unable to suppress an exclamation of pain at the Scotsman's touch.

'You've put out your shoulder,' he told her. 'Lucky for you I've had to learn to doctor.'

Standing up, he put a heavy black boot under her injured arm against her side, and taking her wrist in his hands, gave a long and concerted pull. Jenna felt cold perspiration break out on her forehead as pain spread out from her shoulder and enveloped her whole being. Only pride kept her from shrieking aloud, and then it was over; a dull click which seemed to shake her body, and the worst of the pain was gone. Gasping, she lay back as her hand was released.

'It's over and done with, lassie,' said a voice, and she was dimly aware of Alex MacKenzie taking his cravat from his neck and binding her arm to her side with it.

As though in a dream she felt herself being lifted and carried away. The night air was cold on her damp face and she shivered convulsively; then there were lights and a woman exclaiming before a period of discomfort as she was undressed and, at last, peace as she was laid among cool sheets and allowed to fall asleep.

She awoke some hours later to find that a new day was lighting the room in which she lay. As the walls and furniture swam into focus Jenna discovered her surroundings were totally unfamiliar. She had expected to find herself in the tiny room she had occupied previously, but this chamber was not only larger but better furnished, holding a large bed as well as a low wooden chest and a wardrobe. For a moment her eyes roamed idly, before coming to rest on the pillow beside her which clearly carried the indentation of a head. A movement at the door attracted her attention, and withdrawing her speculative gaze she found the red-headed Highlander watching her.

'This is my room,' he told her, with a wicked grin, 'and as usual I slept here.'

Jenna could think of nothing to say, nibbling her lip and lowering her gaze to stare at the heavy linen sheet with an unwarranted interest as he approached.

'We may as well start as we mean to go on, Miss Winslow,' he said, seeming to emphasise her unmarried state. 'We will live together without the formality of a marriage ceremony. I feel sure I will not shock your sensibility when I say that includes sharing a bed.'

Jenna lifted her chin. 'I must apologise for being such a dull companion,' she said, with a glance at her arm still strapped to her side.

The MacKenzie laughed easily. 'You will not be incommoded for long—a dislocated shoulder usually mends quickly.' With firm, but gentle hands he released the supporting bandage and carefully felt her shoulder, flexing and stretching her arm. 'Does it pain you?' he asked.

Jenna shook her head. 'Not over much,' she answered.

'The support must stay on for a day or so, but you

seem to have been lucky. A broken arm would be a different matter.'

For a moment he stood beside the bed, looking down at her, while she wondered what would happen next and hoped her apprehension was not apparent. 'We must have a talk,' he said at last, and seated himself beside her knees. 'For your own well-being and comfort you must amend your behaviour. You came near to feeling my belt across your shoulders last night.'

Involuntarily her hand crept to her cheek, lightly touching the tender swelling there. Following her gesture, his expression was significant and he nodded grimly.

'Accept the fact, Jenna, that not only am I bigger and stronger than you, but am in a position of power. No matter how unpalatable the fact may be to you, you are under my control, and unless you curb your foolish pride life will prove very disagreeable.'

Jenna eyed him sullenly, reluctant to admit to the truth of his words.

'I wish I had never come to your wretched country,' she burst out, 'with its weak, subjected women and its puffed up, arrogant men—and never a good horse or a decent crop among them. You live like animals, in hovels any decent person would reject, and yet fill your heads with unwarranted pride in your surroundings and ancestry.'

He raised his eyebrows. 'I see you do not like us, Miss Winslow,' he said.

Jenna's angry gaze faltered and fell again to the bedclothes. 'If you must keep me here, then at least have the goodness to marry me,' she said with difficulty, tracing a pattern on the sheets with one finger.

There was a long silence, which filled the room with growing oppression. At last she dared to raise her eyes

and found his gaze full upon her.

'I am afraid, my dear Jenna, that there is very little goodness about me,' he told her with a cynical twist to his lips. 'Marriage is very far from my intentions. You'll have to be content with my protection, as you more sophisticated Southerners call such an arrangement.'

He looked down at her before, tilting up her chin with one finger, he kissed her lightly but deliberately on the lips. 'An' you please me, Jenna, you'll not find me too hard a master,' he said softly.

When she was alone, Jenna sank back against the pillows, mulling over the situation in which she found herself. But search how she would, she could find no way out. Even if one of her erstwhile friends in London would help and if there were some means of sending a letter, it would take ages to be delivered. Without money she had no means of paying her fare or bribing anyone to aid her; she could plan and contrive until her head ached, but there seemed no answer to her plight.

When there was a sharp tap at the door and Mrs Grant appeared bearing a tray, she was quite pleased to be given a respite from her problem and sat up almost eagerly.

'My,' said the housekeeper, spreading a napkin over her lap and stealing a glance at her bruised face, 'what an eye you have there! There's no doubt at all, but the MacKenzie has a grand temper when he's roused.'

'In England no gentleman would strike a lady.'

'Would they not? What a mealy lot they must be—here we like a man to be firm and masterful.'

Jenna could find nothing to say, so, arching her eyebrows to express her incredulity, she gave her attention to her breakfast, finding that her accident did not appear to have affected her appetite.

In fact she seemed very little the worse for her adventure. Before long her aches and bruises had begun to diminish and in a few days she was up and about. By tacit agreement neither she nor Mrs Grant mentioned her position in the house, but the housekeeper took to teaching her housework and keeping, and the English girl relinquished her former rebellious attitude and appeared willing to learn.

Jenna's relationship with Alex MacKenzie was more difficult. On the surface they appeared much like any married couple, but on Jenna's side there was a wariness and on the Highlander's, if not actual cruelty, at best a certain indifference to her happiness—speaking of a basic ill-matching that augered ill for their future together.

The English girl found that the passing days in no way affected her determination to escape from Tenafroich, or Heather House, as she had learned Alex MacKenzie's home was called. While giving the appearance of having accepted the situation, in reality she was watching eagerly for any opportunity that might present itself. Time went by, and she had been at Tenafroich for more than a month before fate gave her the chance for which she waited.

She and Mrs Grant were busy in the kitchen, as usual cooking an enormous quantity of pancakes and oatcakes for the men, whose appetites seemed unending. With a good fire the room seemed warm and cosy against the dark skies and cold wind that moaned outside and did its best to creep in at any chink or crack around the doors or casements. Jenna happened to glance up and nearly dropped her mixing bowl as she caught sight of a face peering in at the window.

At her exclamation, the housekeeper looked up and followed her startled gaze. 'Tam O'Inverness,' she cried

and hurried to the door to call invitingly. 'Come away in, Tam. I was just after thinking you were due. It's out of pins I am, and with only a yard or two of thread left in my workbox.'

Jenna looked with interest at the man who entered, seeing a small wiry figure, dressed in tartan that covered his thin legs and feet, a green wool jacket and a tartan bonnet perched at a jaunty angle on his bright sandy hair. For all he was so sparse in build, he held himself upright with such an air of self-confidence that Jenna recognised him at once as a former soldier. Catching his eye, she found herself receiving an interested scrutiny and looked away hastily.

'This is Tam Ewan, the packman,' explained Meg Grant, feeling some introduction to be necessary.

'I ken fine who are you, Mistress Winslow,' the man said enigmatically, and leaving Jenna to wonder at his precise meaning, he accepted the housekeeper's offer of a meal and went out to put his horse in the stable and bring in his packs.

Watching him carefully during the meal, and afterwards when he opened his packs and showed them the goods he had for sale, Jenna was convinced that Tam Ewan was more than a little interested in her. Often when he thought himself unobserved she felt his eyes upon her, and by dint of small smiles and meaning glances hoped to convey that she was not averse to his attentions.

Mrs Grant was intent upon matching some material and at last left the room in search of the missing piece. As she had known he would, the packman seized the opportunity to speak, but scarcely in the manner she had expected.

'Well, lassie,' he began bluntly, 'what are you wanting?'

'T-take me with you,' Jenna replied quickly, for his curt question had surprised her.

He raised his pale eyebrows and pushed back his chair, the better to examine her. 'I ken fine that all the lassies like me and that there's a charm about my person that makes me well loved by the fair sex, but I must confess your boldness surprises me, Mistress Winslow.'

Jenna shook her head impatiently. 'I'll pay you,' she explained hastily, to clear his misunderstanding.

'Well, now, and there's me after thinking you were fancying me.'

'I want to get away from here,' she told him coldly, and reaching into her pocket, produced a gold signet ring. 'Take me to Inverness and this is yours.'

Taking it from her, he examined it against the light from the candle.

'The payment's not over generous,' he said, pocketing the ring.

Jenna held out her hand. '*After* we arrive at Inverness,' she said firmly and, shrugging, he tossed it across the table to her. 'Well?' she demanded. 'Will you do as I ask?'

He considered. 'The MacKenzie's a braw fellow, and will no' take kindly to the loss of his woman.'

'I should not have thought that a soldier would find him difficult to deal with,' Jenna suggested coolly.

'I've heard tell that your father was a soldier, too,' he responded evenly, 'but he got more out of his service than I did. I left the army with no more than the good wishes of my comrades and a few battle scars.'

'This is getting us nowhere,' Jenna said briefly. 'Will you do as I ask or not?'

'I'm leaving at first light, join me or not as you will. But I warn you, it'll no' be an easy journey,' he ran his

eyes critically over her, making his disparagement obvious, 'for the likes of you.'

Jenna regarded him coldly. 'You'll not find me a burden—' she began, but Mrs Grant returning at that moment, broke off abruptly to resume a mundane conversation in a bright, friendly tone.

Going up to bed that night, Jenna felt that luck was on her side. Not only had the packman arrived, but the moment could not have been more opportune, for Alex MacKenzie was away on business and would not return until late the following afternoon. She was afraid to sleep, fearful of missing Tam Ewan's departure, and, once she was sure the housekeeper was abed, rose and dressed again to while away the long, cold hours sitting by the window. At last the sky began to lighten, at first so gradually that Jenna was not sure of its happening, then the stables and outbuildings began to appear out of the darkness. She stood up, her heart beating an excited tattoo against her bodice.

Twisting a plaid about her shoulders, she snatched up a small bundle of her belongings and left the room, creeping downstairs and letting herself cautiously out of the front door. The packman, who was already loading his wares on to the back of his patient Highland pony, grunted at her arrival and continued his task. At last all was ready, and swinging on to the saddle of the unencumbered horse, he took the reins of the packpony and gestured to Jenna to climb up behind him.

Scrambling up on to the broad back of the sturdy animal, she slipped her hand under the belt of the man in the saddle and tried to hide herself behind his back as they rode out of the yard and took the track that led away into the hills.

By midday the steady trot of the ponies had covered many miles, and so lonely and desolate was the land-

scape that Jenna began to doubt that they would ever come to habitation again. Her back ached intolerably from the long ride and she longed to stop, but the pack-man rode on, deaf to her pleas to rest for a while. At last, after what seemed like weeks of discomfort, he drew the animals to a halt and she gratefully slid to the ground, while he tethered the ponies. Taking oatcakes and cheese from his pouch he seated himself on a convenient boulder and began to eat.

Jenna watched him, realising in dismay as her empty stomach rumbled that she should have provided herself with a meal.

'H-have you any I could have?' she asked politely, unable to bear watching him masticate with such evident enjoyment.

Tam Ewan turned his head to study her thoughtfully. 'Did you no' think to bring vittles with ye?' he asked contemptuously, and Jenna was forced to shake her head. For a moment she thought he was going to refuse, but, reluctantly, he reached into the pouch again and tossed an oatcake to her much as he would have thrown a bone to a dog.

The English girl missed catching it and was forced to pick it up from the ground, contenting herself that the dead heather was clean. Before she had done more than ease her cramped limbs a little, he prepared to move on, and deciding against argument, Jenna climbed up silently behind him.

As the light hovered between day and dusk a smallholding came into sight, a long, low building so close to the ground that it seemed more of a natural hillock than a house. Blue smoke rose in a thin column from the middle of its heather-thatched roof, a few chickens scratched faintheartedly for food and a cow lowed plaintively.

'Are we to spend the night here?' Jenna asked, not much liking the general air of untidy neglect about the place.

'Aye, it's that or the open air.'

Wrinkling her nose at the smell that carried to them from the homestead, Jenna thought that on the whole she might prefer a night under the heavens, but said nothing and rode forward. Whereas the place had seemed deserted, at their approach hordes of ragged children suddenly appeared, their pale faces and unkempt persons reminding her of wild animals as they gazed half-fearfully at the travellers.

'Out of the way—out of the way,' cried the packman, pressing on without care for their safety as they recognised him and swarmed forward.

Sliding from her perch, Jenna found herself the object of many curious eyes and smiled invitingly, but the children did not respond, backing away on dirty bare legs. The packman took her arm to lead her into the house.

For a moment she was blinded by smoke and darkness, then her smarting eyes cleared somewhat and grew used to the gloom. The interior was unlike any other she had ever seen, the rough tree-branches that served to support the roof scarcely more than head height, the earth floor damp and unswept. What furniture there was, was rough and dirty, and piled high with clothing and utensils. To Jenna's astonished eyes it appeared as though nothing had ever been put away for years, merely dropped carelessly on whatever receptacle had a place to receive it—and everything was blackened by peat-smoke.

A man was stirring something in a black pot hanging over the fire in the middle of the room, and glanced over his shoulder at their entrance. He said something in

Gaelic, obviously a greeting, and then looking at Jenna asked questions.

Tam Ewan replied in the same tongue and they both laughed, something in their voices and the approving scrutiny they gave her making Jenna uneasy. 'What are you saying?' she demanded.

'What a fine lassie you are,' rejoined the packman casually. 'Sit down—Lachlan here has invited you to sup with him.'

Remembering her manners, Jenna nodded and smiled at the crofter, seating herself, with a reluctance she tried to hide, at the table that bore evidence of several meals. A dish of greasy mutton stew was placed before her and a horn spoon pushed across the table, then, evidently thinking the courtesies were dealt with, the men gave their attention to their own meal. Seeing that they were deep in conversation, Jenna surreptitiously wiped the spoon on her skirt and gingerly began her repast.

Not even her hunger could make her swallow more than a few mouthfuls, her distaste caused not so much by the layer of fat that floated on top, or the half-cooked meat, but the strong flavour of fish that permeated over all. As soon as she dropped the spoon back in, the dish was seized by a pair of thin hands and one of the ragged children bore it off under her surprised gaze, to fend off its siblings as it gulped the contents.

The same thing happened to the men's bowls, but they showed no surprise at such actions, ignoring the behaviour of the children while they talked earnestly. Once again Jenna found herself the object of their gaze. Something very like a bargain seemed to be struck, and at last a coin changed hands. Her suspicions aroused, Jenna was alarmed when the packman rose, and clapping his hat on his head, strode to the door.

'Where are you going?' she asked quickly, jumping to her feet.

'North.'

'But—you said you'd take me to Inverness.'

'That I did not. I merely agreed to take you away from Tenafroich.'

Jenna stared at him aghast. 'But you can't leave me here,' she cried.

'Now there you're wrong. Lachlan's wife died last summer and I promised to bring him a woman to look after his home and bairns. He's paid good money for you, woman.'

Her mouth and eyes wide with dismay, Jenna glanced about like a trapped animal. 'I can't stay in this dreadful place—with this awful man,' she exclaimed, her voice shaking with terror.

'Losh—Lachlan's no' so bad. What are you howering about? You've changed your situation as you wanted.'

He made to leave but Jenna rushed forward and caught his arm. 'I *won't* stay here,' she shouted.

With one hand against her shoulder, he pushed her backwards so violently that she lost her balance and tumbled against the table. By the time she had disentangled herself, the door was closed behind him. Running outside she saw that he had mounted and was already some distance away. Picking up her skirts, Jenna ran after him, tripping and stumbling in her haste. He did not look back at her desperate calls and finally she gave up, falling panting to her knees as she fought for breath.

At last she stood up and, turning slowly, looked at the surrounding countryside. There was nothing to be seen except for mountains and bleak moorlands, pitted with peat bogs. For as far as she could see there was no other house and not a single living thing, save a bird of

prey which circled effortlessly overhead. . . . After a while she began to make her way back to the croft house.



CHAPTER FIVE

THE children, who had watched avidly from the open doorway, retired at her approach, while the man merely glanced over his shoulder and grinned before returning to the wood he was whitling.

Jenna stood indecisively in the low entrance, unwilling to enter and yet aware of the night approaching across the wild moors behind her. The man rose and, fixing his eyes on her, said something in Gaelic. At her puzzled shake of the head, he indicated the low stool she had previously occupied and obeying his gesture, Jenna sat down while he gave a command to the children. Watching uneasily she saw them pack themselves into a box-bed built into one wall, snuggling down into the dried bracken without bothering to remove any of their ragged clothing. As the heavy wooden doors were drawn closed, she was warned by a knowing expression in their eyes and turned in time to see the man leave his task and approach her deliberately.

Like the children's his expression was easy to read and, springing to her feet, Jenna put the table between them. Glancing about for a weapon, her eyes fell on the table, and blessing the untidy habits of the crofter, she snatched up a horn-handled knife with a sharp blade honed to a wicked thinness, and brandished it fiercely.

'Keep away,' she warned.

The man hesitated at her menacing stance, the lustful gleam in his eyes turning to bewilderment. Keeping a

safe distance and watching her warily, he asked an unintelligible question.

'I don't understand Gaelic,' Jenna told him, her frustration and weariness showing clearly. Momentarily she lowered her guard, and taking the opportunity the man stepped quickly round the table, his hand outstretched to seize the knife.

Recovering, Jenna raised the weapon threateningly. 'Don't come near me or it will be the worse for you—you've heard of Alex MacKenzie—well, he's your Laird and I'm his w-woman. He'll come for me soon, and—and kill you if you've hurt me.' The man had drawn back at mention of the chieftain, his eyes wary and calculating, and she repeated the magic name, loudly and clearly. 'Do you understand, peasant? Alex MacKenzie, your chief, is my man—'

Aware that the man was only hesitating while he mulled over the situation, she sought for some means of convincing him of her relationship with his clan chieftain, and in desperation pointed to her left ring-finger.

'Alex MacKenzie . . . me.' She indicated herself and saw comprehension dawn in the face opposite. 'Alex MacKenzie—*will come*,' she announced loudly and firmly, wondering at her own conviction.

The man made a sound somewhere between a snort and a grunt, expressing annoyance and disbelief before flinging his hands wide in a manner indicating his complete indifference, he threw himself down on a dirty blanket covering a pile of bracken and seemed to prepare himself for sleep.

Warily Jenna seated herself on the stool, her back to a wall, arranging herself so that she could watch the man. He lay on his side, hidden amongst the shadows that filled the house, but whenever a turf fell, sending a shower of sparks upwards, the girl was uneasily aware of

the whites of his eyes gleaming in the sudden flaring light. Despite her determination to stay awake, sleep overpowered her and her chin nodded heavily against her chest. Forcing herself awake, she found that during the long hours of the night the fire had burned itself away; even the faint glow from the smouldering peat was gone and the tiny room in complete darkness.

Warned by some instinct, she clutched the knife and stared into the darkness, straining her ears for some sound. The faintest of noises, more a movement than a sound, came, surprising her by its nearness, and she jumped to her feet, upsetting the stool with the urgency of her action.

'Don't come near,' she cried, her voice shrill and shaking with fright, and at that moment there came a thunderous knocking on the door which added to the confusion and made the children cry with fear.

A command was shouted in Gaelic in a familiar voice and, sobbing with relief, Jenna stumbled to the entrance, feeling her way by the wall. At last her fingers encountered the heavy boards she remembered, and she scrabbled desperately over the rough surface, searching for the wooden bolt that fastened the door. Movement behind her sped her questing fingers but not soon enough for the person outside, who hammered an impatient tattoo, making the ancient barrier shake.

'Alex, Alex!—I'm here!' she cried and, finding the bolt, pulled it back and dragged open the door to throw herself into the arms of the man on the threshold.

'Whist, whist, there's no need for greetin',' soothed Alex MacKenzie, holding her firmly with one arm. 'Who's in the house?'

Jenna brushed away her tears, annoyed with herself for such weakness.

'Only a man called Lachlan and his children,' she

answered, making a half-hearted attempt to free herself.

'Lachlan MacKenzie, is it?' The tall Highlander called, ignoring her efforts to stand aside and, rather pleased with the feel of his body against her, Jenna desisted and stood quietly within the circle of his arm.

The figure of the crofter appeared reluctantly in the doorway, his poise expressive of a readiness for instant flight. Alex looked him over while the other avoided the sharp blue eyes. His reply to a sharp question from the taller man was long and impassioned, his voice high and indignant and yet with a servile whine as he addressed his chieftain. Alex listened intently, with growing amusement, until at the end of the lengthy narrative he burst into laughter.

'He says he paid good money for you and that he had no idea that you were not willing until you attacked him with his own knife. He had to spend all night awake, watching you for fear you'd hurt his children!'

Jenna looked at the man in the doorway. 'What nonsense!' she exclaimed indignantly. 'Why, he was only waiting for me to fall asleep so that he might ravish me.'

Far from sympathising, the tall Scotsman grinned.

'You must understand that he's been without a woman's company since his wife died and to be presented, as he thought, with such a prize, doubtless inflamed the poor cratur.'

'I told him plainly that I was your woman and that you would be coming for me—' Meeting his quizzical gaze she fell silent, blushing and looking down at the ground while his arm about her waist tightened and drew her closer.

'Let's away and leave this luckless Lachlan to what's left of the night,' he said, and tossing a coin in at the

door, turned away as the man fell on his knees in search of the treasure.

Alex had tethered his horse a little distance from the croft house to enable him to approach silently but the waiting animal sensed their arrival and neighed quietly. 'Did I not tell you to be silent?' Alex MacKenzie chided gently, smoothing the velvet nose. 'What good would you be on a raiding party?'

Jenna looked at him. 'Do you go on them—raiding parties, I mean?' she asked.

Alex looked up from the girth he was tightening. 'Aye . . . well, yes and no. If someone steals our cattle, then we follow them and take back what is ours—and maybe a little more for our trouble. But we don't actually go on raids any more. The MacKenzies are peaceable folk, Miss Winslow.'

Jenna looked her disbelief but the Highlander went on, more to himself than to her, 'I've heard several reports of thieves after horses and cattle. It could be rumours, but it would be wise to keep a watch.'

'What lawless folk to be sure,' said the English girl lightly. 'Having been abducted and sold into slavery myself, I begin to believe that there is nothing which you Scots would not do.'

He eyed her sombrely, having fastened the straps to his satisfaction, he mounted and reached down a hand to her. Settling her in front of him, he kicked the horse into movement and went on, speaking above her head.

'Believe me, I am not joking. There are men more wild and lawless than you ever imagined with no compunction or compassion for man or beast.'

He spoke soberly, and a thrill of fear ran through Jenna. Feeling her shiver, Alex drew her closer against his chest. 'And so,' he continued quietly, 'I've a mind to show you a secret known only to my family. There's a

cave hereabouts which might be of use to you—if ever you happened to find yourself in need of a safe refuge.'

Jenna turned herself to look up into the brown face above. 'Are you not angry with me for going with the packman?' she wondered.

White teeth showed in a smile. 'Maybe I've decided to woo rather than force you,' he answered, and bent his head to drop a swift kiss on her upturned mouth.

Her lips softened involuntarily and a sigh escaped her as she melted against his chest, leaning back in his arms the better to see his expression, and found him regarding her with the same curiosity. For a few seconds they jogged on in silence, their gaze held, and then he asked softly:

'Did you run away to make me jealous?'

'You've watched too many romantic plays, Alex MacKenzie,' Jenna told him, realising to her own surprise that there had been a similar motive behind her action. Like a child, if she was not loved she preferred to be smacked rather than ignored.

'All Highlanders are romantics at heart.'

'You must have ridden at great speed to arrive so soon,' said Jenna with some satisfaction. 'How did you know where to find me?'

'I knew Tam Ewan's next place of call and came over the hills rather than following the road. But before your head swells with pride, Miss Winslow, let me tell you that I'd have done as much whatever of mine was taken.'

Jenna sat up abruptly, frowning, but he pulled her roughly back into his arms. 'What I have I hold, Jenna,' he told her, a note in his voice that puzzled her.

For a moment she looked up at him unblinking. 'Should I be flattered?' she wondered softly.

Instead of answering he smoothed her tumbled hair, outlining her lips with one finger. 'Don't run away again.'

Jenna,' he said deeply, his breath fanning her cheek. 'You belong to me—admit that you and I are a pair. Your nature is as strong as mine . . . you'd not care for a mild, gentle lover. You need me—as I need you.'

Knowing that he was right, she still hesitated, unwilling to relinquish her role of ill-treated heroine, and, laughing at the warring expressions that fleeted across her face, the MacKenzie lifted her higher and kissed her soundly. Not displeased by such treatment Jenna kissed him back and they rode on for the first time in their relationship in something approaching amity.

Grey fingers of dawn began to appear in the sky and Jenna roused herself from a light sleep to realise that they had stopped. Alex dropped the reins and allowed the horse to crop the grass.

'Look about and tell me what you see,' he said. Obediently the English girl stared at the countryside; to their backs was the ridge over which they had just come, while below them the hillside sloped almost gently down to the edge of the sea loch. The tower of Hourn could just be seen rising out of the early morning mist, with the water, deep grey and still, behind it.

'What do you see?' repeated the man.

'Hourn Keep—and the loch—'

'Nearer at hand.'

Dropping her gaze, Jenna looked down and suddenly noticed a house nestling at the foot of the mountain.

'Why—I believe it's your house, Tenafroich,' she cried, surprised to see it so near.

'Yes. Now look behind and tell me what you see.' Puzzled she turned to study the bare rock rising steeply from the barely discernible track, with only a particular black shading to distinguish it.

'N-nothing,' she answered doubtfully.

Swinging down from the saddle, the Highlander lifted

her to the ground and led her towards the seamed and broken rock face. 'Look carefully,' he told her and at last, as he guided her, she could see a narrow opening barely wide enough to admit a man's shoulders.

Hanging back as he urged her forward, she shook her head. 'No, Alex,' she protested firmly, 'I do not care for enclosed places.'

'Just look, it's quite large once inside. I promise I'll stay with you.'

Reluctantly she stepped inside, holding his hand all the while, finding it dry and surprisingly roomy, but she made no attempt to hide the fact that she wished to leave as soon as possible.

Taking her shoulders, he held her in the entrance. 'Remember what you can see,' he said. 'If you are to find this cave again, you must memorise its whereabouts.'

Showing her several recognisable features, he made her repeat them until he was satisfied she would be able to find the entrance again, before mounting the horse they rode down towards Heather House.

'Until this moment I was the only one to know where to find Craigdu,' he said gravely.

'Craigdu?'

'Black rock,' he explained. 'You must give me your word to tell no one.'

'Readily,' she agreed, turning in the saddle to look up at him. 'Why did you show *me*?'

'It's time we trusted each other, Jenna.'

A moment longer she gazed at him, her eyes wide and wondering. Then, nodding slightly, she turned away to watch as Tenafroich gradually loomed nearer. As they clattered into the yard and Mrs Grant hurried from the house to greet them, Jenna found to her surprise that a feeling almost of homecoming enveloped her.

Nothing more was ever said about her escapade, but

from that time on a new understanding developed between them, and Meg Grant slipped unobtrusively into the habit of addressing her as mistress. Almost without realising it, Jenna began to take over the reins of the household and found a growing satisfaction and happiness in her housewifely duties. With the approach of winter the country around Tenafroich took on a new and unsuspected beauty; each morning the inhabitants awoke to a scattering of snow on the surrounding mountains which gradually crept down their slopes with each succeeding frosty day. The drab colours of late autumn were left behind, and the air took on a cleanness and sparkle that invigorated the English girl, but not so Mrs Grant. Each day Jenna would return from her walk with glowing cheeks and high spirits to find the housekeeper huddled close to the fire.

'I dinna like the cold,' she told her crossly when she inquired if she was ill. 'Don't fuss me, mistress, I've hated the winter—and this year it's worse than usual, with its cold and snow. Look at the hills with their white caps . . . we're in for a bad time, I tell you. I can feel it in my bones.'

'Anyone would think you a witch, Meg,' Jenna said lightly and was unprepared for the other's reaction to her teasing words.

'Never say so!' cried the housekeeper, springing to her feet. 'I ken fine you're teasing me, mistress, but don't take evil so lightly. If you had seen the things I have, you wouldna joke about such things.'

'I—had no idea you took such foolishness so seriously up here.'

'Never call it foolish—dangerous and wicked it may be, but those who term it foolish are fools themselves!'

'But surely you don't *really* believe in witches?' Jenna asked incredulously.

'Indeed I do, and if you've any sense you would too.'

Jenna eyed the other woman, seeing that she was in earnest and not joking as she had first supposed. Shocked, she realised that the housekeeper was afraid, and, disturbed herself, she bit back the quick retort that sprang to her lips, instead touching the other woman's arm gently.

'I can see that you are convinced of such things, but I cannot believe in charms and spells dispensed by aged crones.'

Meg Grant lifted her head to send her a quick look. 'Not only old,' she muttered. 'You take my word for it, there *are* such things, and folk who use them.' Shaking out her apron, she rose with determination and busied herself with preparations for the evening meal. 'Now I've said enough, it's best not to talk of the devil's work, so I'll say no more.'

Thinking it best to let the matter drop, Jenna began to talk of other things, and soon the conversation had almost slipped from her mind, but her unease about the older woman remained. She was a lively energetic woman, but Jenna realised that over the last few weeks she had become thin and lethargic. At first she would not admit to being ill, but at last when the English girl had found her pale and faint slumped in a chair, coughing weakly, she agreed that something was amiss.

'What do we do?' Jenna asked helplessly. 'The nearest doctor must be in Inverness.'

The older woman made an impatient noise. 'I don't believe in doctors,' she stated unequivocally. 'We'll have a look in my herbal and if I can't cure it, then I'll have to ask Morag Frazer for one of her simples.'

There was a certain reluctance in her voice that made Jenna glance at her quickly, but the other's expression was devoid of any readable emotion.

'Don't you like her?' she asked seriously. 'Shall I go for you?'

'It's no place for a lassie like you,' she was told. 'If my book doesn't work, then I'll be the one to take the track to Morag's cottage.'

That evening the two women pored over the book of herbs and their uses, reading the small printing until their eyes were tired and their brains puzzled by so much knowledge.

'Well, I declare,' exclaimed Jenna at last, pushing the book aside in disgust. 'I had no idea that so much could be wrong with a person . . . and each herb cures so many things! It seems to me that a pinch of everything in the book would bring a dead man back to life.'

Meg Grant rubbed her aching eyes. 'I've thyme and sage for flavouring, but nothing else,' she said hopelessly.

Jenna was struck by a new thought. 'It's the wrong time of year—everything is dead.' For a moment their eyes met in resignation, until the younger woman lifted her head abruptly. 'Except for nettles,' she exclaimed suddenly. 'I saw some only today when I was walking behind the house. There's a sheltered dip there . . . let's see what it said about nettles.'

Eagerly she turned the pages and began to read aloud. 'For clearing the blood none is better than a syrup of young nettles. For eruptions of the skin, lethargy and tiredness of winter a decoction of young shoots mixed with honey should be taken. Well . . .' she looked doubtfully across the table, 'we can but try it.'

The next day, having armed herself with a pair of Alex's heavy gauntlets, she set off determined upon pulling an armful of the vicious plant. Returning a little later somewhat dishevelled from her tussle with the weed, which had proved more difficult to gather than she

had imagined, she met the red-haired Scotsman in the yard. Raising an eyebrow at her unusual bouquet, he put a hand on her arm to detain her.

'Now what would you be intending to do with that, lassie?' he asked, deliberately broadening his accent.

'Oh, Alex! I'm worried about Meg,' she told him. 'She isn't herself and doesn't want you to know. I'm going to make a tisane with these in the hopes that it will do some good.'

His expression grew serious. 'Does she need a physician?'

Jenna shook her head. 'She won't hear of it.'

'Then she must ask Morag Frazer to call.'

'Nor that. She seems to have a down on Miss Frazer, and won't even let me go to see her.'

Alex straightened, pushing his shoulders away from the wall he had been leaning against. 'I'll go, if need be,' he said firmly. 'I see—have dealings with her at times, and Meg will do as I say.' He reached a hand to smooth away the worried lines on Jenna's forehead.

'Don't bother any more, my lassie. Meg will do just fine with Morag's medicine.'

'I'll try the nettles first,' declared the housekeeper. '*Then* if my cough and tiredness isna' better I'll take some of Morag's brew.'

Jenna wondered at the glance that passed between Meg Grant and the MacKenzie, but knowing better than to ask what lay behind it, set about boiling the nettles. Whether it was the effect of being cossetted or if the syrup really worked, Jenna was unsure, but whatever the reason, Meg began to improve. Her tiresome cough became less frequent and she seemed to regain her lost vitality. Well pleased with her first medicinal efforts, Jenna allowed herself to relax.

For some time Alex had suggested that as the lady of

his household she should visit the little clachan of Craigdarroch, to offer her friendship and help where necessary. Jenna had never played the part of a benevolent great lady, and found the thought of calling upon the villagers both daunting and distasteful. Despite her manoeuvres against his plan, Alex proved determined, and one day wrapped her plaid about her shoulders and hustled her into the courtyard. Jenna's protest died away at the sight of a creamy mare tethered along side the bigger grey.

'I thought you had need of a mount of your own,' Alex said drily, well aware of her surprise.

Jenna looked at him. 'You're not afraid I'll take the opportunity to remove myself?'

'With winter nearly here and the roads soon impassable?' he asked, laughing before sobering quickly. 'No, lassie,' he went on softly, 'I'm not afraid that you'll away. I think you are beginning to like it here.'

She smiled up at him, but said nothing as she went forward to pet the horse.

'What's her name?' she asked.

'You'd never get your English tongue round it,' she was told with a teasing smile, 'so you'd best think of one yourself.'

Smoothing the velvet nose, Jenna considered. 'If she's to partner your horse whom you call the Prince, then she had better be Princess.'

'As you will. Mount and see how you like her.'

As she was lifted into the saddle, Jenna was grateful for the full, short skirts that enabled her to ride astride, with all the ease and freedom of a man. Never again, she reflected, would she feel at ease on a side-saddle. She tried a few commands and movements about the yard and then was ready for further afield.

'Now you're mounted we might as well ride to the

clachan—it's time you began your duties.'

Momentarily mutinous, she glared at her companion from under her eyebrows, but the day was pleasant with a thin, watery sun and she longed to feel the strength of a horse under her. Hesitating, she nibbled her lip, disliking the knowledge that she was being manipulated.

'Or shall we put her back in the field?' Alex asked easily.

For a moment longer Jenna paused, knowing that he would have no hesitation in carrying out his threat. 'A ride would be very pleasant,' she said at last, with a lightness she was far from feeling, and smiling to hide her loss of pride, led the way out of the yard and onto the road that led to Craigdarroch.

The next few hours were spent in meeting the families of the spread-out village and accepting hospitality that varied from brose and water to offerings of whisky and pancakes according to the wealth of the home. To Jenna's eyes most of the houses were little better than hovels, with only a low wall dividing the human habitation from that of the animals. A few of the better ones boasted of separate accommodation for beast and man, but all were small and dark with none of the commodities which a Londoner would have thought necessary to his existence. While doing her best to appear unaware of the noisome smells that invaded her nostrils and the general decay and indifference to cleanliness and tidiness that assailed her eyes, Jenna could barely force herself to accept food or drink from such suspect sources, and flushed as she felt Alex's eyes on her as she suppressed a shudder as her lips touched a grimy horn beaker.

At last the ordeal was over and Jenna slumped in the saddle, sighing with relief as the clachan was left behind, and she could think of the comfort of the once-

disparaged Heather House.

'Need you have shown your disgust quite so blatantly?' Alex asked coldly as soon as they were clear of the last house.

Jenna stared at him in astonishment. 'What *do* you mean? I took great care to hide my feelings.'

'So you don't even deny that you despise the dwellings and folk of Craigdarroch?' he queried savagely.

'How could I not? We wouldn't house pigs in those so-called dwellings. I saw rats keeping company with ragged, bare-foot children. Those villagers of yours, Alex MacKenzie, have no idea of how a community should be run. Why, the stream they use for water is little better than an open midden!'

Alex reined in his horse and she was surprised to see his face white with anger as he towered over her. Taking her arm in a bruising grip, he shook her slightly.

'If you were as poor and hopeless as they, you'd be as dirty and unkempt, Jenna Winslow, but I know for sure that they would not be as harsh and unsympathetic in their judgement of you. They brought out their pathetic attempts at hospitality and you wrinkled your nose in contempt. Do you think they didn't know—and me embarrassed by your ill-manners!'

'Oh, Alex!' she cried, ashamed that she had not disguised her feelings better. 'I wouldn't have hurt their feelings for the world.'

'Sitting there apeing the great English lady, all condescension and graciousness, while careful to keep your skirts out of the mire and away from the dirty, snivelling children.'

Jenna dropped her eyes, aware that he had read her thoughts exactly; the children had been dirty, their skin grimed and broken by sores, and she had barely been able to repress a shudder at the streams of mucus that

ran from their noses.

'I—did try,' she whispered. 'Truly—'

'Then you will have to try harder,' she was told harshly, and without another word or a backward glance he kicked his heels into the sides of his mount and galloped away, leaving her to make her own way back to Tenafroich.

Knowing she was in the wrong filled Jenna with floods of guilt, made worse by the fact that Alex made no attempt to hide his scorn for her behaviour. For a few days she wallowed in self-pity while the Highlander watched her with impatience and no understanding for the niceties of a girl thrown among unfamiliar surroundings, poor and squalid beyond anything she had ever known or dreamed of. Growing tired of her sombre mood, he called his men together and set off into the mountains to gather up the horses before the worst of the winter should begin.

Knowing they would be gone for some days, Jenna was at first relieved to be alone with her thoughts, but shortly after their departure she became aware of an unwelcome but familiar sound from the kitchen.

'Meg,' she cried, entering the low room, 'you're coughing again!'

Pressing a hand to her side, the housekeeper could only nod, and the English girl blamed herself for being so involved with her own problems that she had not noticed the return of the other's illness.

'And worse than ever—why didn't you tell me?' she asked contritely.

'Dinna' fash yourself,' Meg replied, but nevertheless allowed herself to be seated in a chair near the fire. 'It's nothing to be bothering about. I didn't finish all the nettle syrup you made. I'll take that and be better before Himself returns.'

For all her stout words, Meg was far from better the next day, going about her duties with a mouth tightly compressed over the cough that shook her periodically, and with one hand pressed against the pain in her chest. When she responded to Jenna's pleas and allowed herself to be helped to bed, the English girl knew with dismay that she must be feeling very ill and wished desperately for Alex's return.

When she had lit a fire in the cold bedroom, placed a heated stone at her feet and tucked the older woman under the blankets, she had never felt more helpless as she stood at the window gazing out at the bleak, grey scene. Heavy iron-coloured clouds loomed over the high mountains, wanting to loose their icy contents on the ground beneath. The horses had tucked themselves into the shelter of the stable wall sensing that bad weather was to come. With the approaching dusk all the colour had left the countryside, dead bracken and faded heather, rocky hills and peat moors blending together in a picture of desolate winter.

With a shiver Jenna pulled the curtains across the window, turning thankfully to the fire, which was sending a comforting warmth and light about the tiny room. Seating herself on a low stool beside the hearth, Jenna looked about with interest at the housekeeper's domain. Although the furniture was plain and functional, Meg Grant had made every endeavour to cheer up her room by use of what materials she had and her clever needle. The curtains were old and much darned, but their rosy velvet was still a lovely colour and their weight kept out the icy draughts. On her bed was a patchwork quilt that spoke of hours of patient effort and now brightened the dim room like a painter's palette.

During the night the Scotswoman grew worse, rousing Jenna from her bed by her restless murmur. Doing the

best she could with the means at her disposal, Jenna knew that as soon as morning came she must seek help, and waited anxiously for the long night to be over. As soon as the first grey streaks appeared in the dark sky, she wrapped her plaid about her shoulders and left the house. Luckily the cream mare responded to her call, allowing herself to be caught and bridled easily. Lowering her head against the sleaty rain that was falling, Jenna cantered out of the yard and turned her mount in the direction of Morag Frazer's cottage.

A thin column of smoke rising from the chimney was the only sign that the tiny house was occupied, but a figure appeared in the half-opened door as she rode up.

'Good morning Morag,' she called pleasantly. Sliding to the ground and tethering Princess in the shelter of some overhanging rocks, she crossed the muddy ground to the door. 'May I come in?' she asked still smiling, but unhappily aware of the other's hostility.

Reluctantly Morag moved aside. 'If you must,' she said ungraciously. 'You'll have come about Mistress Grant's sore chest, no doubt.'

Jenna looked at her, 'How did you know?' she wondered, taken aback by her knowledge.

The other laughed unkindly. 'It's no secret in the village,' she rejoined. 'And it was either that or the fact that you're still barren.' Her eyes travelled maliciously over the English girl's slim figure as deliberately she smoothed her gown over her own swelling stomach so that Jenna could not miss the fact of her pregnancy.

Ignoring her provocative words and gesture, Jenna seated herself on the only stool to be seen and began to describe Meg Grant's symptoms with considerably more composure than she was feeling.

The other nodded her dark head. 'It'll be water on her lungs,' she said gravely, losing her antagonism in her

interest in the patient's condition. 'You must get clay from the river, heat it, spread it on a cloth and apply it to her back and chest as hot as she can bear. As for the fever and cough, I can give you something to ease her.'

'Wouldn't it be best if you came and saw her?'

Morag shrugged and turned away to busy herself among the bottles and containers on a cluttered bench beside a wall. 'You've described her condition well enough. Hereabouts it's called the Bloody Flux—and there's little enough I can do about it. Go home and turn those delicate hands of yours to the task of nursing.'

Jenna took the proffered bottle. 'How much do I owe you?' she asked coldly.

The question seemed to amuse her companion. 'Tell the MacKenzie himself to settle the matter when he comes home,' she said, her eyes bright with suppressed mirth.

'I am not in the habit of giving Mr MacKenzie orders, but I will give him your message and no doubt he will take appropriate action,' Jenna said coolly, and was annoyed to see the taller woman's amusement grow. Swinging on her heels, she left the house and mounting swiftly rode away, aware that Morag Frazer had come to her door watching her out of sight, one hand almost idly resting on the bulge that thrust out the full tartan petticoats.



CHAPTER SIX

SHE had been almost unaware of the villagers as she had ridden through Craigdarroch on her outward journey, but now she realised that eyes were watching from every house, and recalling the reason behind Alex's recent displeasure, she summoned up a smile and nodded a greeting to every face that revealed itself.

The children were the first to come; emerging like shadows to gather round her horse in silent escort, their eyes large and unsmiling in their pale faces. Jenna knew that curiosity rather than friendliness had brought them, but was glad to see them nonetheless, and smiled and nodded down to them.

'I'll bring you a sugar stick next time,' she promised rashly, and realised by their uncomprehending expressions that none spoke English.

Reaching the last of the strung-out croft houses, the children fell back and, looking over her shoulder, Jenna saw that a few adults had come to their doors to watch her progress. On an impulse she lifted her hand and waved, and was much cheered when one or two of the women shyly returned her gesture. With a lighter heart than she had owned for some time, she headed for home and was surprised to see a horseman on the road ahead.

As they drew nearer, she recognised Alex's fiery head and raised her hand in greeting.

'Where have you been?' he demanded as soon as they met.

'To Morag Frazer,' she answered readily.

His brows drew together in a frowning line. ‘Did I not tell you not to go there?’ he asked.

Jenna’s heart sank; in her pleasure at seeing Alex again she had forgotten their recent quarrel.

‘Mrs Grant is ill,’ she told him pleasantly. ‘I went to Morag’s for medicine.’

‘Let her alone—she’s not for the likes of you.’

‘More for you, you mean,’ she flashed quickly without thinking and gave him a defiant look as he glowered at her.

‘Mind your tongue, lassie,’ was all he said, but with such a rough anger in his tone that she fell silent, pondering uneasily upon the possible truth of her unwitting remark.

The next few days were taken up with nursing the house-keeper, giving her little time to think of anything save the sick woman. When they arrived back at Tenafroich, they had been met by the murmurs and muttering of delirium in the silent house and, forgetting their argument, had exchanged startled glances before starting up the stairs to be confronted by Meg Grant tossing and fiery red with a high fever. Since then Jenna had barely left the bedroom, except to arrange hurriedly some nourishing refreshment for the invalid, while the household went on as best it could without either of its mainstays. At last either Morag’s medicine and advice took effect or the illness burned itself out, for after several days of worry, Meg Grant dropped into a deep sleep and awoke many hours later, weak but cool, and without a sign of fever or pain.

‘You’ll do, now, Meg,’ Alex said, looking down at her, ‘and you’ve got Jenna here to thank for your life.’

‘Oh, no—it was Morag’s simples and Meg’s own good

constitution—' protested the English girl, smiling at them both.

'It was your good care,' Alex insisted later, when, for the first time for days, Jenna joined him in the parlour. 'I am grateful—Meg is one of my oldest friends. She went to America with us and was my mother's right hand.'

'I'm glad she's better,' Jenna said simply, and sank into a chair unable to hide her weariness for a moment longer.

'Take your supper, lassie, and then away to bed with you.' Cupping her face in both his hands, he smoothed the dark shadows under her eyes with the balls of his thumbs, and his voice was curiously tender when he spoke. 'What a tired, wee thing you are.'

Jenna smiled tremulously and replied as she had so often in her life. 'It's quality, not quantity that matters.'

Alex kissed her. 'And you, *mo gaiol*, are of the very best.'

'Oh,' Jenna lowered her eyes and made a show of beginning to eat, secretly pleased by the endearment. A feeling of well-being crept over her, warm and pleasant, enveloping her in a cocoon of happiness. The wind outside blew round the house on its journey through the glens, making the windows rattle with the force of its passing, but inside the room all was secure and warm. Jenna sighed.

'Do you know,' she remarked companionably, 'I'm beginning to like your Highland weather—there's something about your wild nights that makes me feel cosy and protected.'

'I had not thought to hear you say such a thing,' Alex answered gravely.

She looked at him steadily. 'And I—had not thought to say it,' she confessed.

His hand covered hers, his touch sending a thrill

slithering down her spine. Of their own accord her fingers twisted and entwined with his. ‘I think—I might love you, Alex MacKenzie,’ she said softly, in a voice so low that the man across the table only just heard her words.

His grasp tightened with a force that made her gasp as her hand was carried to his mouth. Breathlessly she watched as each of her fingers were kissed, but only later did she wonder at the blaze of triumph that showed momentarily in his eyes as he met her gaze.

The next days were so calm and restful after the anxiety and effort she had been called upon to make, that Jenna felt she had weathered a storm and revelled in the peace and happiness that now seemed to enfold Heather House.

The only excitement that broke the tranquillity was the arrival of a colourful, ragged band of gipsies who camped by the stream that flowed through Craigdarroch. Their activities were watched with interest and no small amount of suspicion by the villagers, who had good reason to suspect that their arrival would coincide with the disappearance of a chicken or two. Nonetheless their appearance was tolerated and even looked forward to on account of the indispensable service they would offer by mending tinware belonging to the housewives, and by the excitement their volatile personalities would provide.

‘We’re glad to see them come—and as glad to see them go,’ remarked Meg Grant watching their camp from her bedroom window. ‘There’ll be many a fight before they leave, take my word for it.’

But the gipsies were strangely docile, going about their business with so quiet and lethargic an air that the crofters were torn between disappointment and relief.

'Well, they've never been like it before,' Mrs Grant told Jenna with an air of apology. 'What *can* have got into them?'

Riding by the camp that afternoon with Alex, Jenna glanced curiously into one of the lean-to shelters as she passed and felt that she had learned the answer to the housekeeper's question.

'That child's ill,' she said suddenly, halting her horse and drawing the Highlanders' attention to a small child being tended by his mother. A tiny, flushed face moved restlessly on a rough pillow and two small hands struggled to throw off the coverings from his hot body. A thin whimpering carried to their ears, and at the pitiful sound Jenna slid down from Princess's broad back and hurried to the crude shelter.

'What's wrong? Can I help?' she asked, kneeling beside the sick child.

The mother said nothing, crouching beside her baby, one hand protectively on the small body. Her manner made the English girl think of a wild animal with its young. Looking at the dark hollows in the emaciated little face and the almost translucent skin, Jenna knew that the boy was seriously ill, and glancing about the rough tent that contained the mother's few possessions she realised how meagre was the family's resources.

'What can we do?' she demanded of Alex, who had joined her. He looked down at the child and shook his head.

'Come into our outbuildings—at least you'd be under shelter there,' Jenna suggested impulsively, turning back to the other woman.

'She'll not come—you can't cage a wild animal,' Alex said with finality, and in her heart she knew it was true.

'But—he'll die!'

'Aye.' Alex's comment was laconic as with one hand

under her elbow he lifted her to her feet.

'I'll send some soup,' she offered quickly, speaking over her shoulder as she was urged away.

The woman neither answered nor looked round, and Jenna knew that her promise meant very little to the gipsy mother, used as she was to indifference or ill-treatment.

'I'll be back,' she promised, but the woman only bent lower over her child and, feeling frustrated and helpless, the English girl allowed herself to be helped into the saddle, gazing at the pathetic group for a few seconds before joining Alex who had already started off along the track.

They were gone most of the afternoon, having spent the time with the factor who lived at the far edge of the spread-out township, in a more substantial house as befitted his rank. Alex had gone to talk over the arrangements for the coming rent collection which would be held on the river bank a little further down the valley, at a place convenient to all the far-flung folk who owed rent to their Laird.

Jenna had little in common with Rory MacKenzie's wife and found that the sight of the factor brought back vivid and uncomfortable memories of the night Nannie Frazer's croft house had been burned. An age seemed to have passed since that evening, and Jenna looked back on the happenings with something like astonishment that after all the emotional and physical tribulations to which she had been subjected she could feel so unexpectedly happy and contented. Viewing the situation as objectively as possible, she realised that she had been lucky beyond all her dreams in finding a home and security in so unlikely a place.

Across the room Alex met her glance, and reading the affection in her eyes, his own gaze softened, sending a

message that made her hastily lower her lashes for fear the factor and his wife would read their unspoken conversation.

At last all was arranged for the rent collection to be held in a few weeks' time, and once the courtesies were over they could make their farewells and escape.

'You'll not have to worry over the laddie,' commented Alex as they rode by the gipsy camp.

Jenna was already staring in amazement at the empty space where the rough shelters had been; only the trampled grass and a few blackened spots where their fires had burned showed where the tinkers had camped.

'Poor child,' she said softly. 'Let's hope he'll be all right.'

'Aye—and not be the cause of any trouble to us,' was the Highlander's somewhat enigmatic reply, which Jenna had cause to remember nearly two weeks later.

The morning had started badly. Not only was it dark and miserable with a heavy rain falling, making the yard thick with mud which was brought into the house on the mens' brogues and seemed to penetrate everywhere, but Mary, the little maid taken on recently to light fires and help generally in the more menial tasks was unexpectedly absent, and the household arose to a cold house and no water ready heating on the kitchen fire.

'Where she can be, I don't know,' said Meg Grant, who had recently resumed her early rising. 'It's not like her to be late and not let us know.'

'Perhaps she's overslept,' Jenna offered calmly, setting about lighting the fire, disguising the fact that an unreasonable worry was filling her with an unease she could not explain.

Later that day she knew that she had very real cause to be apprehensive. Mary had arrived at last, sick with

worry and unable to stop longer than the time it took to make her excuses.

'The bairns are sick,' she explained, refusing to come into the house and hopping from one bare foot to the other on the doorstep. 'Mam's half out of her head with the worry o' it.'

'What's wrong with them?' the housekeeper asked quickly.

'Sore heads at first, and now they're burning up with fever and their wee stomachs are so upset that whatever they take just runs out of them.'

'I'll come,' Jenna said without hesitation. 'You go on, Mary, and I'll collect a few things and follow you.'

'It sounds infectious,' warned the housekeeper. 'It's best that I go—you'll not have had experience of such things.'

Jenna shook her head. 'With you just out of the sick room? No, Meg. I'll go—it's probably nothing.'

But when she arrived in Craigdarroch, she knew at once that it was very far from nothing. The village seemed deserted, no children played beside the houses, no women gossiped comfortably at their doors. Even the chickens that normally clucked and fussed about the rubbish middens were strangely absent or muted. Jenna looked about her with a feeling of dread and slipped from Princess's back slowly, needing to call up all her resolution before she could walk towards Mary's house.

Tapping on the half-opened door she entered quickly, before her fear should win and she would run back to her horse. At her entrance a woman kneeling beside a pile of bracken which served as a bed for several children, turned a white, anxious face to her.

'Mistress MacKenzie,' she murmured with a faint note of surprise in her voice. 'We're no fit for visitors—'

'Mary told me that you had illness in the house—I came to see what I could do,' Jenna told her, throwing back her plaid.

The woman shook her head and sat back on her heels. 'I dinna ken what's wrang with them,' she said. 'They're that fretful—and I canna keep them clean.'

A dreadful suspicion had taken possession of the English girl, and stepping forward, she bent quickly and lifted up the ragged shirt of the nearest child. She had no further to look; there on his stomach was the tell-tale collection of sparse rose-red spots. Without much hope, she pressed her fingers across them and saw with despair that they had disappeared with the pressure.

'Do you know what it is?' asked the watching woman.

Jenna stood up. 'I've—seen it before,' she answered slowly. 'Are there any others who've taken it?'

'Aye,' was the grim answer. 'Most of the children and a good few of the older folk.' She looked at Jenna closely. 'It's bad, isn't it?' she asked, already knowing the answer.

Jenna nodded. 'It can be. Let's hope this is a mild outbreak.'

'What'll we do?'

Jenna thought quickly. 'It's catching—so be careful to keep bedding and crockery away from healthy people.' Even as she spoke, she realised the impossibility of what she was asking. In surroundings such as these hygiene was impossible, and even cleanliness was difficult. 'Do your best,' she amended, 'to keep the plates you use for the children, only for them. Wash the crockery you use for anyone without the illness separately—and the same thing for the bedding.' She looked down at the fretful children and sighed. 'Has anyone sent to Morag Frazer for some of her brew?'

'Aye—Morag's around.'

'I'll find her. Don't worry, Mrs MacMartin, I am sure your little ones will be all right.' Jenna said, knowing how banal were her words as she left the tiny house.

She found Morag just leaving one of the cottages at the further end of the little township. For a moment the two women eyed each other warily. Jenna was the first to break the silence.

'Can you help?' she asked boldly.

The other shrugged. 'I can ease the fever and calm some of the symptoms—apart from that there's little anyone can do.'

'You've seen it before?'

'My granny was an Inverness woman, I've heard her speak of it. One outbreak there carried off half the townsfolk.'

'The villagers mustn't know,' the English girl said firmly, holding Morag's gaze steadily. 'Tell them that it's nothing more than a stomach upset—something they've eaten.'

Morag nodded briefly in agreement and went on her way. As she left the shelter of the house wall and turned towards the next croft to be visited, the wind blew her plaid against her, outlining the high round stomach, and Jenna found herself wondering when the Scots girl's baby would be born.

'Jenna! Jenna!' Alex's voice broke into her thoughts and she turned to find him bringing Prince to a plunging halt behind her, scattering earth and tufts of grass with the urgency of his actions. 'Go home, you shouldn't be here.'

'I've seen it before,' she told him as he jumped to the ground. 'I think it's typhoid.'

'Dear God!' He closed his eyes against the image her bald statement called up. 'You *must* go home,' he repeated urgently.

She shook her head. 'We'll not be safe there. We all might have taken it already.'

'That child—the gipsies brought this,' he said savagely.

'Very likely. It's more of a town sickness than one found in the country, so Morag says.'

Alex looked at her quickly. 'She's here?'

'Yes—and ready to produce her infant at any moment, I'd say. I only hope she waits until this is all over. We'll have need of her during the next days.'

'Do you know what to do?'

'Not really. I was in London during one outbreak.' She looked down at her hands as she paused uncomfortably. 'I—did not help,' she confessed, ashamed now of her indifference then. 'My maid nursed her family and my Godfather was a doctor in the area. They both told me of their experiences.' She put her hands to her burning cheeks. 'Oh, Alex—I hid away in my house and thought how virtuous I was to send money to help the sick.'

The tall Highlander took her wrists and gently pulled her hands away from her face. 'You could not have nursed all London,' he told her practically, 'and your money was doubtless of more use than a gently reared lady with no idea of nursing or illness and a delicate nose and stomach.' He smiled down at the rueful agreement in her eyes as she acknowledged the truth of his words.

'You've served your apprenticeship with Meg Grant, *mo leanan*—now you'll be much more useful.'

'*Mo leanan?*' she wondered.

'My love,' he translated and bent to kiss her lips. 'I see you'll not be turned from helping my people—all I ask is that you take no unnecessary risks.'

'I give you my word.'

'And what do we do?'

Realising the heavy responsibility that had been laid on her, Jenna felt a wave of fear that made her knees weak, and for a moment she longed to run from the stricken village, but almost of their own accord her slender shoulders straightened and she looked about with calculation.

'No one knows how it is spread—so we'll take every precaution,' she said almost to herself. 'We'll have a bonfire in the open space in the centre of the village every day and burn all the bracken used for bedding. The folk well enough will do all the washing of sheets and clothes. Meg Grant has enough soap to ease the tasks.' Turning, she looked thoughtfully at the shallow river flowing beside the rough track on which they stood. 'My Godfather suspected that the water supply had something to do with it, and the gipsies were camped above the village.'

Alex was quick to answer. 'I don't see how—but we'll ride up there to see what we can find.'

'We don't know what we're looking for—it would be better if we could change the water. Could it be brought from Tenafrroich? We take our water from a different stream—'

'And so far we're free of the sickness,' Alex said thoughtfully. 'I'll have barrels brought down each day.'

Quickly the villagers were organised, seeming relieved to be doing something constructive against the illness in their midst. Jenna was both pleased and touched to see how they turned to her for advice, accepting her orders eagerly and with a simple faith that made her aware of how little experience and knowledge she had to offer.

'I feel so helpless,' she confessed to Alex a few days later. 'There is so little we can do. I know so *little*—and the villagers expect so much of me.'

Alex and his men had brought the water-barrels down to the village, and she was taking the opportunity to speak to him and have a moment's rest. Jenna looked back at the tiny dwelling she had just left.

'A little one died in there this morning,' she said, her voice shaking with grief and tiredness. 'There was *nothing* we could do. His mother just put him aside and tended her other children. Oh, Alex,' she rested her head on his chest and his arms came round her strongly, 'they are *so ill*—the mothers say "it's God's will" and that seems to comfort them. *I* could not accept it so easily.'

Alex raised her face and kissed away her tears.

'It's your nature to fight,' he told her, 'even against the forces of which we know nothing. The folk of Craigdarroch feel this, and that's why they have turned to you in their troubles.'

'Morag, too.' Jenna said quickly. 'Her medicines have helped—' Her voice died away as she remembered the hostility emanating from the Scots girl whenever they met. She had hoped that working so closely with the other girl might lower the barrier and at least accept her presence with equanimity, but Morag showed no signs of anything approaching friendship. Instead her coldness and dislike seemed to grow with each day.

'She doesn't like me,' she said, without meaning to speak her thoughts aloud.

Alex's arms relaxed and he turned her to walk a few paces with him. 'Morag?' he asked after a while, making it clear that he had followed her thoughts. 'I'm sure you are wrong. Why should she not?'

Jenna hesitated, nibbling at her lower lip. 'I think she's—jealous. I've seen her watching you,' she smiled wryly, 'and believe me, she does not dislike you.'

'What nonsense,' he answered forcefully, but the

English girl sensed that he was uneasy, and following his gaze as he stared over her head, saw the dark figure of Morag half-hidden in the shadows of a doorway. Her face was a pale blur as she turned away, but Jenna felt a shiver prickle between her shoulderblades as she realised that the baleful eyes had been fixed on them for some time.

'You see,' she whispered. 'She was watching.'

'She'd probably come to the door for air,' was the reasonable surmise, and Jenna fell silent, knowing that to insist would only make him think her foolish. 'You're tired—let me take you home and you'll feel better in the morning.'

'I don't feel *bad* now,' she told him crossly, shaking his hand from her shoulders. 'There's too much to do for me to leave now. These people depend on me.'

As he rode away she regretted her bad temper and would have run after him, but as she started forward, a figure hurried out of a cottage and intercepted him before he left the village. As Jenna watched, Alex glanced back at her as he exchanged a few hasty words with Morag before clapping his heels into Prince's grey sides.

After a moment the English girl turned away, but not before she was aware that Morag had turned to stare at her and even at that distance her stance and expression seemed to hold an undeniably triumphant air. Puzzled, and more bothered than she cared to admit, Jenna went about her business. So sure was she of her own position and Alex's love of her, that the thought that he and the other girl might still be having an affair did not cross her mind. That Morag found him attractive she was quite sure; but she was equally certain that there was no room in his heart for anyone beside herself, and deciding that the girl was merely jealous and trying to re-establish her former position in the village, Jenna dismissed the

matter from her mind and went back to the business of nursing the sick and encouraging the weary helpers.

From her former experience Jenna knew that the turning point in the illness would come during the third week, and that then the patient would either die or recover fairly rapidly. Most of the invalids were at or approaching that moment, and the next few days passed in a haze of unending work and anxiety. There was no time to mourn over the dead; Jenna and her band of helpers merely turned aside to the living and went on with their work.

At last, when Jenna could hardly remember a time when illness was not rife, she paused late one afternoon and, straightening her aching back, looked about for the next task needing to be done. Slowly her tired brain took in the fact that except for the one patient sleeping peacefully the room was empty, the other beds held no one tossing in fever, the fire was replenished and burning brightly and the water-jug was full. It took several minutes for her to realise that there was nothing for her to do, and then she wandered almost listlessly out of doors.

Clean linen was flapping on lines stretched from house to house and the remains of a bonfire smouldered on the green. A touch of frost was sharp and cold in the air, but the winter sun shone with a fierce brightness that made Jenna screw up her eyes against the glare. Despite the chill she lifted her face into the wind, enjoying the freshness against her skin, and on sudden impulse pulled the pins from her hair and shook it loose about her shoulders.

Almost too tired to think, she sank down on a convenient boulder and rubbed a hand across her aching forehead.

'You've won, Jenna—it's over,' said a voice behind

her and Alex's familiar hands took her shoulders and drew her back to lean against him.

Jenna looked about the quiet village, tranquil in the moments before afternoon lengthened into evening and realised with surprise that his words were true. 'Please God,' she said simply and relaxed for what seemed like the first time in months, suddenly aware of how tired she was.

'I'm taking you home,' Alex told her firmly, and without waiting for her reply, lifted her into his arms and carried her to where Prince waited. Wrapping her plaid about her like a child, he cradled her in one arm and rode home slowly.

Lulled by the movement, Jenna's eyes drooped wearily, but her tired brain was nagged by something that had been puzzling her for the last few days, something she had noticed but been too busy to comment upon at the time. Heavy with exhaustion, her mind worried at the problem until she suddenly realised what it was that bothered her.

'Alex,' she asked sleepily, 'what's happened to Morag? She hasn't been around for the last few days.'

She thought he stiffened, but waves of sleep overwhelmed her and she drifted into oblivion before he replied.

She awoke much later and lay for some minutes listening to the gale that was lashing the house. The day was so dark and overcast that she could not guess the time, but knew by her relaxed and languorous state that she had slept for some hours.

Stretching luxuriously, she yawned and flexed her arms above her head and as though she had called the kitchen door below was opened and footsteps briskly climbed the stairs. Meg Grant's enquiring face appeared round the edge of the door, breaking into a smile when

she saw she was awake.

'Well, now and how are you feeling?' she asked.

Jenna considered. 'Well,' she answered. 'Very well,' and fell silent struck by the remembrance of a possibility she had been considering before typhoid struck Craigdarroch; with the passage of time that possibility had become almost a certainty, and with the realisation her heart began to race.

'Mm?' she asked absentmindedly, becoming aware that the housekeeper was obviously waiting for her to reply to a question.

'Will you be getting up mistress?'

'Y-es. Off you go, Meg, and I'll be down in a minute.' Jenna stopped the older woman at the door. 'Oh, Meg—I wondered what had happened to Morag Frazer. I didn't see her at the end. She didn't take the sickness?'

Mrs Grant paused in the doorway, but did not turn round, instead busying herself by giving the latch a quick dust with the corner of her apron. 'Morag?' she repeated casually. 'She's quite well—fine, in fact. I hear she's the mother of a bonny boy.'

She left quickly, leaving her words hanging in the air, almost as though she had no wish to be asked any questions on the subject. Thoughtfully Jenna leaned back against her pillows. Usually the wind howling outside induced a sense of warmth and security in her, but now the gale sounded harsh and unfriendly, and she shivered involuntarily before, flinging back the covers, she jumped out of bed.



CHAPTER SEVEN

ONCE she had grown used to the idea, Jenna found the fact that she was expecting a baby filled her with excitement and pride. Although she was certain in her own mind, she had heard enough of false hopes to be wary of sharing her secret; instead she hugged it to herself, unaware that Mrs Grant watched her with astute eyes.

Within a short while the crofters of Craigdarroch had recovered their equilibrium and the rent collection, which should have been held in early November and had been put off during the sickness, was arranged for the next week. Instead of taking the dues in the open space in the village as usual, Alex decided it should be held in one of his barns, so that the event could end in a *ceilidh* and dance to celebrate the recovery of the little township from the ravages of the dreaded disease.

Jenna, Meg Grant and the womenfolk of the village were kept busy baking and cooking various dishes; never had so many oatcakes been made or so many chickens met a summary end, and at first Jenna put the violent headaches she was experiencing down to the extra work and preparation involved. They would come on quite suddenly, with a blinding pain that made her sick and giddy, and leave as quickly and with as little reason. At first she tried to keep the attacks to herself, but soon their intensity and frequency were such that the others could not but be aware of them.

'You're doing too much,' Alex said. 'We'll have another girl in from the village.'

'You must take more care of yourself, lassie,' Meg told her, nodding her head sagely and making Jenna wonder if she had guessed her secret, but neither of these remedies proved effective and she continued to be almost incapacitated at times.

And so the matter went on until the day before the rent collection, when the English girl was busy with a hundred differing tasks and battling with an overwhelming headache. She had closed her eyes and leaned her head against the cool walls of the scullery when Mary, the girl from the village, came upon her.

All the young girl's mothering instincts came to the fore and Jenna found herself seated in a dark corner of the kitchen, clutching a herb tisane, while the Scots girl regarded her patient thoughtfully. 'I'd say you'd been overlooked,' she announced.

Jenna looked up quickly and hastily lowered her head again, wincing with pain. '*Overlooked?*' she repeated.

'Aye—someone has put a curse on you, no doubt about it.'

'Oh, come, surely you don't believe in witches.'

The girl looked stubborn and pinched her lips. 'I know as our cow took bad and my Grannie said she was charmed.'

Jenna shook her head. 'No,' she said quietly, 'it's not that. I daresay I'm just tired.'

'Well, I'll ask my Grannie what she thinks. She'll know what to do,' Mary said firmly, and the next morning her very first act was to sidle up to Jenna and push something hard and spiky into her hand.

'What's this?' she asked, looking down at the object lying on her palm.

'It's a cross made from rowan twigs and tied with a bit of red cotton. My Grannie says it's a sure charm against witchcraft—none better. Just you put it down your

bodice and you'll no' be troubled again.'

Jenna smiled and shook her head. 'It's kind of you, and thank your grandmother for me, but really—.'

'Now miss, just you try it. She'll be awful upset if you don't.'

'W-eell, all right then, and thank you both.'

Aware that she would hurt their feelings if she refused, Jenna gave in gracefully and slipped the rough cross into the neck of her bodice. Going about the myriad tasks still awaiting her, she was busy for the whole day with no time to think about herself, and it was not until the rents were paid and the evening festivities about to begin that she realised that she had not been troubled by even the vestige of a headache all day.

Alex locked away in a stout box the money that had been collected, leaving his men to see to the dues that had been paid in kind, and the yard was a scene of activity as homes and places were found for chickens and oats, barley and butter, and even the odd container of whisky, made in an illicit still. Jenna knew that those who could not pay were treated leniently and that most had their rents reduced, while Alex often refused the little that could be afforded by the folk who lived at existence level, barely able to feed and clothe themselves.

She had watched the ceremony of rent-paying with interest, realising that it was something revered by both participants; more than a mere collecting of money. Each man came to renew his loyalty to his chief, while the MacKenzie himself acknowledged his duty to look after his people, pledging himself to care for them as kindly as if they were his own children.

The barn had been swept and space cleared for dancing, while anything that could be utilised for seating had been arranged against the walls. As she entered on

Alex's arm, Jenna hastily scrutinised the table at the far end, hoping that her calculations had been right as to the amount of food needed. The scrubbed boards were laden with platters and dishes filled with homely food, and bannocks and oatcakes even overflowed into piles on the bare table. A pink succulent ham took pride of place, while the more familiar joint of mutton was arranged in a more lowly position beside the round of moist Dunlop cheese, the recipe for which was Meg's closely-guarded secret. A barrel of ale stood nearby, while jugs of whey were set for the children.

Jenna reflected that but for the lack of fruit it might have been any southern 'harvest home', with tartans and plaids replacing corduroy and homespun. To her surprise she was stopped in the middle of the floor. Alex patted her arm and nodded encouragingly as one of the old men of the village stepped forward importantly.

'Mistress,' he began and paused, searching for words, before lapsing into Gaelic.

His speech was long and involved, passionate at times and at others quiet and gentle. He spoke earnestly, holding Jenna's gaze with his bright blue eyes while his venerable white beard wagged eloquently. At last he paused with a drama which would have done credit to an actor at Drury Lane. With a flourish he produced a small wooden box, highly polished and ornately carved. Glancing at Alex for guidance, Jenna saw that she was to take it, and smiling her thanks, accepted the gift.

Lifting the lid, her nose told her what the box contained and she exclaimed in delight. 'Tea!' she cried. '*China* tea. What a lovely surprise! How kind of you to think of me.'

She looked at the sea of faces surrounding her, and remembered how hostile and anonymous they had seemed a short while before. Now they were all familiar

and easily recognisable, while friendly affection was in every expression. Dropping an impulsive curtsey, she allowed her pleasure to be seen and thanked them again.

Above her head, Alex signalled to the fiddler who at once started up a lively tune, and all was confusion as partners were sought and sets arranged.

'I don't know it—I don't know how it goes,' Jenna protested as she was led into the middle of the floor to lead one of the sets.

'You'll learn—there's nothing to it,' Alex laughed, and somewhat to her surprise she found he was right, the steps were much like any country dance and soon she had gained enough confidence to forget her initial hesitation and enjoy herself in the general exuberance.

'Alex,' she whispered in his ear, when they had retired to a quiet corner for a moment's respite, 'how could they afford such a gift for me?'

'They all contributed, *mo ghaoil*. It's grateful they are.'

'They've so little, and yet they give me a present,' Jenna said wonderingly, her eyes travelling over the perspiring dancers and the old folk sitting round the walls. Hardship and care was written on all but the youngest, and yet their worn faces carried a resolution and determination to live life to the full that filled her with admiration. 'Do you know,' she confided, 'I once thought them wild and cruel, like untamed animals? Now I think them the best folk in the world.'

Alex was amused by her enthusiasm. 'Remember they are only human,' he advised, 'with as many failings as any of us. The crofters are like children, with a child's loyalties and loves, and as quick to quarrel and take offence.'

'At the moment I love them,' Jenna told him.

'Tomorrow you'll find them out of favour,' said Alex.

'They'll irritate with their foolish pride, or annoy with their refusal to accept your good advice.'

She shook her head and laughed, and turned to find one young crofter, braver than the rest, at her elbow, hopeful of a dance with her. Alex waved them away, going in search himself of partners, as was his custom at such affairs. Jenna enjoyed the unsophisticated evening more than many a grand ball she had attended in the past. There was something so open and unabashed about the crofters determination to enjoy themselves that conveyed itself to her and she entered into their mood with abandon, finding that before long she could trip as lightly as if she had danced to wild Highland music all her life.

Suddenly the mood changed, the dancers fell back as if by mutual consent and two heavy broadswords were laid solemnly to form a cross on the earth floor. Alex and three other men stepped forward, hands on hips. Jenna had expected to hear the fiddles again, but from near the door bagpipes began to drone and then burst into skirling music. The men began to dance facing each other across the bare blades of the swords, their faces blank in concentration, their feet flying in intricate steps. Occasionally sharp yells rent the air, chilling Jenna with their savagery, reminding her that the sword dance was originally an expression of anger or triumph; a war dance very far removed from the gentilities of the ballroom.

The dance and piping ended, a faint drone and heavy breathing from the four dancers lingering in the air. For one moment Jenna was aware of the villagers eyes upon her, blank and hostile, and was reminded abruptly that by birth she was an enemy. Momentarily disconcerted one hand flew to her throat where a pulse beat, and then the moment was gone, the villagers relaxed and smiled,

noise and movement became general and Jenna found Alex at her elbow.

'F-for a moment then, I expected to find myself struck by a million *sghian dhus*,' she admitted shakily, glad of his support.

'Our traditional music carries us away at times—but you're a friend now.'

'I hope your people remember that.'

'I wouldn't think you have over much to fear.'

'N-o.' She sounded doubtful.

'Are you not sure of us yet, Jenna? Do you not feel safe with us?'

Almost she told him of her suspicions of Morag, but the suppositions were too faint, too tentative to be spoken aloud, and she let the moment pass. She knew too, that she did not want to see his reaction if she mentioned the girl's name. At the moment she was too happy with her secret and a loving man to want to bring in a jarring note, and there was something about the mere thought of Morag Frazer that tended to spoil her enjoyment. Determinedly putting aside all thought of the girl, Jenna seized Alex's hand and plunged back into the dancing.

Later, exhausted but happy, she allowed him to lead her from the barn. So tired she could hardly stand, she was grateful for his arm around her waist and leaned against his strength as she paused in the doorway of the house and looked back across the yard to where music could still be heard and lights still spilled out of the open door.

'They'll not stop until dawn,' Alex said, reading her thoughts. 'We Scots are a hardy race—and while we may not have many social events, when we do we're determined to make the most of them.'

'Won't they mind us leaving?'

He laughed and swept her off her feet. 'They expect it, my *bronag beag*,' he responded, and carried her up the stairs. Kicking the door behind him, he crossed the room and deposited her on the bed. 'And that, as I'm sure you are about to ask, means, "little darling".'

From amid the tumbled pillows, Jenna smiled up at him, her hair a dark cloud about her face. 'What delightful endearments you wild folk have—so much better sounding than ours. *Bronag beag*,' she repeated slowly, listening to the sound.

Alex leaned on his elbow beside her, 'Sweetheart is rather pleasant,' he said softly, tugging at the strings of her bodice. 'And very appropriate.' Putting aside the lace of her chemise, he kissed the smooth silky flesh of her shoulder. As he unlaced her bodice the little rowan-wood cross fell unheeded to the floor, shot across the polished boards and came to rest in the deep shadows of a far corner.

With the ending of November, winter really arrived, the snow which had been creeping down the Ben since early autumn fulfilled its threat and the sages, who had been foretelling the advent of the worst winter in memory, were gratified to awake one morning in the middle of December to a thick, white covering and a storm that blew the snow into deep drifts.

Lifting the curtain to peer out at the little she could see of the unfamiliar world, Jenna shivered at the sight of madly swirling pellet-like flakes that obscured all but the nearest objects, and hastily turned back to the warm fire. Pulling the little three-cornered shawl she wore in the house tighter about her shoulders, she tucked the knotted ends into her waistband and held her hands to the blaze.

All that day the storm raged, throwing snow against the windows with a sound like flying gravel, blanketing any unevenness with a smooth covering and plastering the walls with freezing white. Alex and his men champed with impatience, thinking of all the jobs that awaited them and mooned around the house, peering out of the windows and getting in the way of Jenna and the house-keeper as they prepared food and saw to the general running of the house.

'Shall we play cards?' suggested Jenna, taking pity on the tall Highlander as he stared out at the enveloping storm for the umpteenth time.

'Luckily I brought my sheep down before this began,' he said, 'but there'll be some who didn't.'

'There's nothing you can do now,' she answered practically. 'So why not draw the curtains and forget your worries?'

'Aye, why not? There's little enough can be done today,' he replied, closing the curtains against the elements and coming to join her beside the fire.

They were sitting in the parlour, having given over the kitchen to Meg and the men. With the candles lit and their chairs drawn close to the glowing fire, Jenna felt a companionable warmth begin to invade her and even knew a sense of security as the wind and snow battered at the house.

Drawing up a small table between them, they brought out the cards and began to play, Jenna soon discovering how good a player Alex was.

'How do you think we passed the long winter evenings in the Colonies?' he asked, studying his hand.

'In much the same way as we did in London,' she rejoined dryly, reminded of her brother as she spoke.

'Now—if I were a city gallant,' he went on, drawling as he arranged his cards, 'playing against a beautiful oppo-

nent. I would propose a wager of a kiss or a lock of her hair.'

'Indeed? These long American evenings cannot have been so dull after all.'

He smiled secretly and sent her an amused glance. 'But you and I, Miss Winslow, have need of no such devices,' he murmured as she grew hot and embarrassed and looked away, well aware that he was laughing at her discomfort. 'In fact I can think of better things to do than play cards,' he said, and reached for her.

Jenna avoided his hands. 'I must go and see that Mrs Grant has arranged the evening meal,' she said, and whisked herself out of his reach.

Alex stretched his feet to the fire. 'I'll be waiting when you return,' he promised lazily, and pausing at the door Jenna looked back and knew a thrill of pleasure that she was so obviously desired.

Opening her eyes next morning as Alex left the bed at first light, Jenna knew that the headache had returned in force, and was only too pleased to obey his injunction to remain there until the house was warm. Sitting up cautiously as soon as he had left, she was overwhelmed with nausea and giddiness and was thankful to collapse against her pillows and close her eyes upon the gyrating world.

Some time later, Mrs Grant found her there and after one look at her white face, hurried away to return quickly with a steaming cup and a crust of bread.

'Lie still and eat the bread,' she instructed, waiting until Jenna obeyed, before helping her to sit up and proffering the cup of pale liquid. 'Raspberry tea,' she explained briefly. 'I've always found it invaluable in childbearing.'

Jenna looked up quickly, meeting her steady eyes and the older woman nodded slightly. 'I ken fine that you're

breeding, lassie,' she said softly. 'A dry crust first thing is good for the morning sickness, and raspberry tea, will ensure an easy birth—it never fails.' She smiled down at the girl. 'Don't you think it's time you told Himself?' Mistaking the other's hesitation, she hurried on. 'If it's worried you are, there's no need, for I'm sure he'll marry you now.'

Tidying the bed and room she went on surmising happily to herself, but Jenna heard no more of her chatter; until that moment, her mind had been so taken up with other matters that she had genuinely forgotten that she was not wed. To be suddenly confronted by the unwelcome fact brought her up short, filling her brain with all kinds of suppositions. Suppose Alex MacKenzie refused to marry her? Recalling his original reason for bringing her to Tenafroich, she was suddenly afraid of his reaction to her news, afraid that she would read triumph in his expression and know that he had never considered marrying her.

Unbidden, their conversation of the previous evening came into her mind. Had there been a subtle emphasis upon his use of the title 'Miss' when he addressed her? Looking back, there seemed to be many incidents pointing to the fact that he had no intentions of uniting legally with her, and suddenly, Jenna's bubble of happiness burst, leaving her insecure and miserable.

Later she forbade Meg Grant to mention her pregnancy to anyone, ignoring the other's bewilderment at such an action, determined to wait her chance to find out precisely what Alex's feelings were upon the matter. Since their first meeting his feelings towards her had undergone a change, she told herself. At first he made her the object of bitter revenge, but lately she had thought he had been kinder, softer, almost tender at times; and knowing her own emotions, she had

persuaded herself that he felt at least affection for her. But now she was not sure. His kindness could have been merely tolerance to one who shared his bed and board.

Upon reflection she thought that she preferred dislike to indifference, which by evening was what she had persuaded herself Alex felt towards her. With the passing hours her sickness had left her but the headache remained, dulled into a heavy throb that filled her head like weaver's lint.

At last the men came in, tired from their long day digging out paths and animals from the enveloping snow and she could barely wait until they were alone to put her question to the red-haired Highlander. For some reason that evening they never seemed to have a moment together without someone interrupting or some demand being made upon them, and Jenna grew steadily more impatient and distraught.

At last they went to bed and against all common sense, which told her that Alex was too tired to think straight let alone give her the answer she craved, she plunged at once into the matter that had bothered her all day.

Sitting up against the pillows, she watched as he undressed and flung his clothes in the general direction of the nearest chair.

'Alex,' she began imperatively, pausing as the phrases she had been practising all day, deserted her. 'Alex, I want to be wed,' she said quickly before her courage vanished as well.

The words came out more loudly than she intended sounding both arrogant and demanding, and Alex paused as he pulled his shirt over his head before tossing it to join the other garments on the floor.

'The devil you do,' he remarked casually, climbing into bed. 'Whom do you have in mind?'

Realising that she had spoiled the opportunity Jenna

tried again, making her voice conciliatory. 'I mean us,' she said leaning on her elbow to look at him.

Blue eyes opened suddenly and she found herself the recipient of a gaze that held inquiry and something more she could not identify. 'Why?' he asked.

Jenna was in a quandary; she had no wish to confront him with the coming baby until she knew if he loved her and wanted to marry her. To tell of the expected event first would savour too much of blackmail.

'I . . . would feel more secure,' she said at last.

Alex closed his eyes. 'Only a while ago you were determined to escape me,' he remarked. 'Am I such an excellent lover that you are afraid of losing me?'

'Alex,' she said, low, 'don't tease. I want to be married.'

'And I, my dear, do not. Have you forgot the reason I brought you here?'

'Revenge,' Jenna said bitterly, knowing the depths of despair.

'Among other things,' added her companion, but so quietly that the words seemed meant for himself. He went on more loudly, 'We'll go on as we are, Miss Winslow, for a while yet. I find I like the situation.'

'I—would be *respectable*,' cried Jenna.

Alex turned on his side, pulling up the bed clothes and hunching a shoulder. 'Then first you must find a husband,' he told her with finality, his voice already slurred, and a few minutes later his steady breathing told Jenna that he was asleep.

Because she knew that she had bungled the affair, sleep was a long time coming to the English girl as she lay awake, unable to decide whether Alex had been merely aggravated by the time and manner of her question or whether he really did not intend to marry her. She knew that some men regarded the marrying ceremony as an

unnecessary nonsense and regarded themselves tied to their common law wives by bonds of love without the benefit of religion or legality. Until a short while ago she would have been content with these suppositions, secure in her certainty of Alex's love. But now the seed of disquiet had been sown, it began to grow and assume enormous importance.

As the days went by Jenna tried to hide her unease and behave normally, never mentioning the matter again. Beneath her calm exterior she grew nervous and tense, watching Alex for anything which would confirm his feelings either way. The headaches grew worse, filling her head from morning to night and becoming almost more than she could bear.

'You'll have to tell him, lassie,' admonished the housekeeper. 'Look at you—you fair remind me of some poor, wan creature the fairies have charmed.'

Jenna looked up as quickly as her head would allow. 'Do you believe in spells?' she asked.

Mrs Grant was silent, her glance downcast and her expression thoughtful. 'I'm—no' so sure,' she conceded at last. 'My common sense tells me that most of the tales told round the fire are nonsense—but then again there are things that can no' be explained.'

Her voice was low and soft, her accent very much in evidence, and after a while she lifted her head and sent Jenna a thoughtful look. 'You'll not be thinking that's what ails you?' she asked.

'No,' the girl said quickly, 'of course not,' and would have shaken her head if it had not ached so much, loth to admit that the thought *had* crossed her mind.

Meg Grant eyed her strangely, 'I'd say,' she said slowly, 'that your troubles are more natural than that.'

Jenna nodded. 'Of course,' she repeated and changed

the subject, but was left with the impression that the housekeeper had not totally dismissed the possibility of witchcraft being at the bottom of her malaise.

The next few days were uneventful, but about a week later she noticed Mary Smith, the little scullery maid, watching her. The headaches had made her dull and listless, and as she went about her tasks she became aware of Mary's childish form appearing in doorways, or her anxious face peering at her from the shadows. At last she roused herself enough to hold out her hand and command her to come into the light.

'What is it, child?' she demanded wearily. 'You've been following me all day. Mrs Grant will scold you if you leave your work undone.'

'Ye're no' so well, are ye?' Mary asked baldly.

'I—do have the headache.'

'Ye've been *charmed*. That's what,' burst out the child.

'Oh, no. One doesn't believe in charms nowadays.' Even to her own ears Jenna's protest sounded weak, and the tow-haired girl ignored it.

'Ye've left off my Grannie's rowan cross,' she said with finality.

Jenna sat very still. Until that moment she had totally forgotten about the crude cross, but now she realised its lack and an icy shudder slithered down her back.

'I'd forgotten—' she said.

'My Grannie'll make you another,' the child told her and gave a quick nod before returning to her neglected jobs.

The next morning something hard and rough was thrust into her hand as Mary passed. 'Wear it day and night, my Grannie says,' she whispered, with an uneasy glance round the room. 'Mistress Grant doesna believe in such things,' she explained as she slipped away.

Jenna looked down at the crossed pieces of wood in her hand, noting that as before they were bound together by bright red thread. With a smile for her own gullibility, she slipped it inside her shift, finding the feel of the hard wood surprisingly comforting against her soft flesh. As she had half-expected the throb in her head began to diminish almost at once, and a short while later had gone. Taking out the cross, the English girl gazed at it wonderingly, turning it over on the palm of her hand before returning it to its hiding-place.

'What the devil's this?' Alex demanded, having discovered it under her nightdress that night and holding it up the better to examine it by the meagre light of the bedside candle. His face grew taut with anger and his mouth tightened. 'I'll not have you believing in such nonsense,' he declared snapping the thread with which she had hung it round her neck, and throwing the would-be safeguard into the furthest corner of the room.

Jenna cried out at his action and clutched his arm, staring at him with disbelief. 'What do you mean?' she demanded. 'You said yourself that there might be some truth in witchcraft.'

Alex flung himself back against the pillows. 'I'll not have all this talk about witches and spells—if I hear one more word from anyone against Morag it will be the worse for them.'

'Morag!' breathed Jenna '*Morag*.'

'Aye. Don't say her name as if you'd never heard it before, woman. You know as well as I about the lies and rumours the villagers are spreading about her. I'd not thought to find you among the number of gossip-mongers.'

'What are they saying?'

'I told you I won't be a party to it. I'll not hear another word.'

The bed shook and creaked as he turned his back and ostentatiously settled himself for sleep, but in fact Jenna had little wish to prolong the conversation. Suddenly all her vague suspicions had crystallised into a quiet certainty which filled her with a chill fear.

While Alex slept soundly she lay awake, her mind a turmoil of fears and disjointed, nervous thoughts; until she had decided upon a course of action she knew she would not be able to rest and at last, as the first rays of dawn began to creep across the sky, she made up her mind. As soon as the roads were passable she would visit the Scots girl and see for herself whether there was any truth in the wild supposition that suddenly seemed so possible. With her decision made, Jenna turned on her side and fell into a troubled sleep, dreaming of imps and goblins and fearsome old hags until she was glad to find herself awake and sitting up, alone in the tumbled bed.



CHAPTER EIGHT

LATE that evening Meg Grant raised her hand and indicated that Jenna should listen. Obeying, the English girl strained her ears and at last caught an alien sound which puzzled her for a moment, before she realised that it was the sound of water dripping from the eaves; with as much suddenness as the snow had come, the thaw had arrived.

With a thudding heart she knew that the way was clear and that there would be no reason why she should not visit Morag Frazer in the morning.

After a restless night she lifted the curtain hopefully and was almost disappointed to see a wet and dripping world; the pristine white countryside had been transformed into a sea of slush and mire. But from her window she could see that already people were taking advantage of the thaw and that although the sun had only just risen the road was busy with traffic.

Ignoring her usual headache, Jenna busied herself with her household tasks, refusing to think about her proposed errand until they were all finished. At last the house was tidy, the small amount of necessary washing drying round the kitchen fire, and the meals of the day arranged. Removing her apron slowly, she knew that the visit could be put off no longer. She reluctantly took down her plaid and told Meg that she was going out.

'Whatever for?' demanded the housekeeper, aghast at such a proposal.

'There may be some folk in the village who have need of something we can supply.'

'Then, Himself or one of the men shall go.'

Jenna shook her head and began to put a selection of useful items into a basket. 'No,' she said, 'I shall go. It will do me good to get out.'

Mrs Grant looked at her steadily. 'You're going to Morag Frazer, aren't you?' she asked, accepting Jenna's startled movement as confirmation. 'I've heard the stories too, my lassie, but thought *you* wouldna believe them.'

'I—don't know that I do,' Jenna told her slowly, 'but I *do* have the headache and it *is* better if I carry a rowan cross.'

'Aye—well. . . . No one will deny that strange things happen, but you'd do better not to go alone. I'll come with you.'

'No,' Jenna put a hand on the other's arm. 'It's kind of you and brave, but I want to go alone.'

'Himself would never forgive me—'

Jenna held her eyes. 'What I hear will be for my ears alone,' she said meaningly, and reluctantly the older woman nodded.

'You're right—but if you're late I'll send a man after you.'

Forcing a smile, Jenna fastened her plaid with a brooch. 'What could harm me? I'm a woman grown and don't believe in witches,' she returned brightly, and crossing the room quickly left the house before she could change her mind.

Princess was unusually restive as she bridled and saddled her, refusing the bit and sidling nervously. As Jenna fastened the last buckle the stable darkened as she looked up to see little Mary Smith scurrying across to join her.

'I ken where you're going, mistress,' she said quickly. 'You're after visiting the witch.'

'I'm calling on Morag Frazer,' Jenna rejoined.

'Aye—the witch,' the child repeated stubbornly. 'Well, if you'll take my Grannie's advice you'll look out for a wee dolly.'

'A—what?

'A wee dolly—made of wax and resembling you.'

Ice ran through Jenna's veins and a violent shiver shook her as she understood what Mary meant. 'What nonsense!' she said loudly, bolstering her failing courage. 'I'm merely calling on Mistress Frazer out of friendship.'

'Oh aye.' The child's eyes were enigmatic and much older than her years. 'Then, you'd be wise to keep your eyes open and the rowan cross about you.'

She appeared prepared to stand her ground until Jenna promised and realising her firmness of purpose, the English girl nodded and touched her bosom where the cross resided.

'I've it safe, never fear,' she said, leading Princess out of the stable, and climbing into the saddle.

'Have a care, mistress,' the girl called as she trotted out of the yard, and Jenna lifted her hand in salute, aware of a thread of fear in Mary's voice and of an answering thrill of anxiety herself.

The mare was nervous and difficult the whole ride, needing to be coaxed and urged forward all the time. Her ears pricked unhappily and once past the village her reluctance intensified. Feeling it would be quicker to walk, Jenna kicked her heels against her flank and at last Morag's tiny cottage came into sight.

A thin trail of smoke wafted upwards and the door was slightly ajar. With a sense of dread at the coming interview and yet determined to go through with it, Jenna

slid to the ground. As her feet touched the turf Princess reared up, jerking the reins out of her grasp and with a shrill neigh, turned about and galloped back the way they had come, before Jenna could do more than recover her balance and shout her name.

With a flick of her rounded hind-quarters the mare was out of sight beyond a turn in the path, and with an impatient sigh Jenna turned back to the little house to find the doorway now filled. Morag leaned against the wall, her arms folded, her eyes narrow and watchful as she stared at her visitor.

'What do you want?' she asked curtly. 'A simple or a medicine—or perhaps a cure for the headache?'

Jenna was surprised by such blatant effrontery, but shook her head. 'No,' she said steadily, 'I have a perfectly good remedy for headaches already.'

The other frowned, her black eyebrows snapping together in a thin line. 'Then why do you come?'

Jenna held out the basket. 'A neighbourly visit,' she said. 'Besides—I thought it time we had a talk, you and I.'

The other surveyed her, meeting her challenging gaze with a ready antagonism as she ignored the proffered basket. Suddenly her expression changed and something like amusement appeared briefly in her black eyes.

'Perhaps you are right,' she said. 'Come in and have a strupak,' she said, using the old Scots word for a cup of tea.

Jenna obeyed her inviting gesture warily, stepping past her into the dark interior. An ungentle hand in the small of her back urged her forward impatiently.

'Go away in,' commanded Morag. 'There's a stool by the fire while I make the tea.'

Jenna seated herself reluctantly on a tiny three-legged stool, wondering how anyone in the other's position

could afford the luxury of tea when it was so expensive.

'A present from the village folk,' supplied Morag, reading her thoughts. 'Folk often give me presents,' she explained and smiled at the English girl's expression.

Jenna watched as a handful of something was tossed into a black pot and hot water from the kettle that hung over the fire poured on. Accepting the steaming cup that was thrust at her, she stared into its brown depths, wondering uneasily as to its contents.

'No need to worry, Miss Winslow,' came Morag's taunting voice. 'It's good tea straight from China via Inverness.'

Jenna sniffed delicately, but her nose told her that the Scots girl spoke the truth, and abandoning her fears she drank some of the aromatic liquid before returning to the matter that had brought her to the cottage.

'I have the feeling that you and I are not the best of friends,' she began, realising the enormity of putting her suspicions into words.

'No,' agreed the other unhelpfully.

'I would go so far as to say that there was actual enmity on your part.'

'What difficult English words—and I with little more than my native Gaelic.'

Jenna frowned at the soft words. 'I'd venture that your English is near as good as mine,' she retorted, remembering tales of Morag having lived in Inverness.

'How could it be so? When you're a high-born English lady and I'm just a lowly peasant. How could I be as good as you in any way?'

'Precisely,' said Jenna softly, feeling that they were coming to the crux of the matter. With an impatient gesture she put her cup down on the hearthstone and leaned forward, staring at the other intently. 'You act as though we were—rivals.' Although she had to search for

the word, she realised how applicable it was, and was struck by the knowledge that at last the other's attitude was explained.

Morag made a show of sipping her tea, her eyes meeting Jenna's above the rim of her cup, bright with triumph. Setting down the empty cup, she licked her lips with the tip of a bright pink tongue before standing up and crossing the room purposefully. Jenna watched as she bent over a cradle against the far wall and reaching in, plucked out a bundle and returned to the fire.

'Take a look at my fine wee son while you're here,' she said, and placed the baby in Jenna's lap. Involuntarily Jenna's arms closed around the bundle and she put back the headcovering with an age-old gesture, stopping abruptly as a blaze of red hair met her gaze.

Behind her Morag laughed. 'None could mistake his father,' she said. 'Yon laddie is brushed with the MacKenzie badge for all to see.'

As Jenna stared down at the child on her lap, his eyes opened and she found herself the recipient of a familiar gaze, as shrewd and intelligent as his father's.

'You m-must be proud of him,' she heard herself saying. 'What a pity he'll not be able to name his father!'

With a hiss of rage Morag seized back her baby, clasping him to her bosom as she glared at the other girl. 'Have you no' wondered why Alex'll not marry you? I ken fine that you've asked him lately—you canna hide that bump under your apron from me. I'll tell you why, my fine lady.' She advanced upon her, her face distorted with anger and involuntarily Jenna took a step backwards, away from the venom in the glittering black eyes. 'It's *me* he means to wed!'

'No!' the denial burst from Jenna. 'That's not true!'

'Think about it—did he set the day when you asked him? Did he say "yes" to you?' Her lips curled in

triumph at her victim's shattered expression. 'If you're no trouble, I might let you stay at Tenafroich when I'm mistress there,' she added contemptuously.

Jenna's chin lifted. 'I wouldn't stay in the same cowshed with you, Morag Frazer,' she cried.

Morag smiled, showing her teeth, her eyes gleaming. 'Would you not? Don't you know, you silly Sassenach, that I have the power to make you do what I like? Why do you think your wee head's been sore all these weeks?' She saw Jenna's eyes widen in realisation, and nodded. 'That's right, lassie. I gave it to you—with *this*!'

With a sudden movement she reached past Jenna, reaching to take something down from a shelf. Jenna's gaze widened in horror as she recognised the wax figure as a travesty of herself; a scrap of MacKenzie tartan formed a rough skirt, tufts of dark brown hair were pressed into the head, while nail-clippings stuck out from the tiny hands like a Chinese mandarin's claws. But the thing that riveted her attention, making the blood in her veins turn to ice, was the black thorn that pierced the forehead.

With a cry of loathing and terror she snatched the vile object from Morag's grasp and thrust it deep into the heat of the peat fire, watching with fascination as it began to melt at once, twisting and writhing in a travesty of movement until it caught fire, burned with a brilliant white light for a few seconds and left an obscene black mess which quickly crumpled away to nothing.

'There,' she said, turning to Morag, '*that's* what I think of your witchcraft.'

The Scots girl eyed her thoughtfully, something in her gaze making Jenna's relief vanish as shivers ran down her spine.

'If I were you,' Morag said deliberately, 'I'd be careful of fire from now on.'

'I'm—not—afraid of you,' declared Jenna between chattering teeth, gathering her scattered courage.

'Then you should be.'

Suddenly the English girl could take no more; the oppressive atmosphere of the tiny cottage made her senses reel, while the stench from the fire took away her breath. With one arm she thrust the other aside and plunged for the door pausing on the threshold to gasp between deep breaths of fresh air.

'I'll tell Alex—'

To her immensurable surprise a peal of high-pitched laughter filled the house behind her.

'Where do you think I got the hair and nail parings? You'll no' find Alex MacKenzie ever interested in your tales—he knows them already.'

With a cry of despair Jenna clapped her hands over her ears, shutting out the mocking, malicious voice, and fled, slipping and stumbling in her haste to leave the hated sound behind.

She reached the main road and with scarcely a pause turned away from the village and Heather House, running in the other direction without thought or consideration, knowing only that she wanted never to see Alex MacKenzie again.

Soon a stitch in her side forced her to slow her pace, but she walked determinedly on without a backward glance, wishing only that she had Princess's strong legs to carry her forward the quicker. As the sun rose higher overhead, pangs of hunger reminded her that she had not eaten since the morning and she thought longingly of the basket of goodies she had left behind with Morag Frazer. The thought of the malice and evil she had left behind quickened her flagging step for a while, but eventually the mud that clung to her shoes, soaking her stockings and making her skirts heavy and cold, began to

tell on her strength, and not even rage and wild misery could prevent her pace slowing to a crawl.

Before long she was forced to rest, sinking wearily on a boulder that was conveniently out of the wind and yet caught the sun. She had not realised precisely how tired she was or how the scene at the cottage had exhausted her, until she sat down and closing her eyes against the glare of the sun which was surprisingly warm, she slipped into a restless doze. The steady beat of galloping hooves awoke her and she opened her eyes abruptly, staring for a moment at the unfamiliar surroundings before leaping to her feet as she recognised the approaching horseman.

'Keep away,' she shouted, looking about for a suitable weapon and gathering up a handful of stones. 'Don't come any nearer,' she warned, lifting her hand threateningly.

As far as she could see, Alex did not slow his speed, and she hurled the stones at him, one after the other, with all the force she could summon. Most flew past his head, but one struck his shoulder with little effect, it seemed, for he still came on. Realising she was trapped against the rock face that had lately sheltered her, Jenna caught up a dry branch of a tree that lay at her feet and waited warily.

'Well?' she demanded as Prince was halted beside her, so close that she had to shrink against the rock to avoid contact with his master's leg.

'What nonsense is this?' Alex asked roughly.

'Ask your paramour.'

'Morag's no more my lover than—Meg Grant is.'

'Do you deny that you're father to her child?'

She saw from his expression that he could not, and felt the faint hope she had been nourishing fade.

'I suppose you would have me believe that you know nothing of her wicked spells either—that she obtained

my hair and nails by magic.'

'I don't know what you are talking about,' he said curtly. 'Give me your hand and we'll go home.'

Jenna eyed him defiantly. 'I'm not going anywhere with you.' She saw the look on his face and stepped back until the rock face was hard against her shoulders. 'Oh, yes, I know you could carry me there by force,' she cried scornfully. 'You think brute strength is an answer to everything.'

He was watching her intently, his face grim, and she hurried on. 'I hate you, Alex MacKenzie! You could take me back to Tenafroich with you, but nothing you can do would make me your companion again. Our days would be spent in silent indifference and our nights in loathing. . . . Your presence makes me shudder.'

His face was white as he looked down at her. 'Tell me, Jenna,' he said, 'what makes you feel so?'

'Hypocrite! Traitor! You *know* what makes me feel so—you plotted with Morag while pretending to care for me!'

'Who told you this?'

'I didn't need anyone to tell me, it was obvious when I thought about it, but if you must know, Morag confessed.'

'She lied.'

Jenna was past belief, her anger and misery consuming her. 'You can't even be true to her,' she exclaimed, laughing bitterly, and pushing past Prince's shoulder, squeezed by and began to walk quickly along the path.

She had gone only a few paces when she became aware of sounds of movement behind her, and glancing back, she saw the man and horse following.

'Go away,' she cried, lifting the branch she still clutched. '*Leave me alone.*'

'Gang on your way, lassie,' the rider said, his accent so

broad she could hardly understand him, 'and I'll gang mine.'

Jenna gritted her teeth. 'Then go past.'

'When I'm ready.'

With a gesture of annoyance and a flick of her skirt, Jenna swung on her heel and strode away, her shoes making angry sucking noises in the mud. The horse kept pace with her, his head nodding at her shoulder all through the hours of the short winter afternoon. Weariness claimed Jenna, her step slowing, until she moved aside, gesturing for the horse and rider to go on.

'Oh no, Miss Winslow, not even such a rogue as I would leave a female benighted in our wild country. Go ahead.'

'I—would rest,' Jenna said, staring out over the countryside, rather than look at him.

'Later. It will soon be dark and we must be in shelter before then.'

Jenna looked about for something on which to sit, but now when she needed it the surroundings were denuded of all rocks and boulders; if she would sit then it would have to be on the sodden ground. While she hesitated, a booted foot nudged her in the small of her back.

'Onwards, Miss Winslow,' Alex urged with another prod from his toe, and because she was too tired to think of doing anything else, Jenna obeyed.

By now her feet seemed scarcely to belong to her, being almost numb with cold and aching from the miles she had walked. Suddenly she stumbled and fell to her knees, her arms outstretched to save herself from falling headlong. Too exhausted to make the effort to regain her feet, she sank back on her heels while tears of weariness slipped down her cheeks.

'Come up before me,' came Alex's voice, the harshness gone from his tones and sounding almost gentle.

Jenna found the strength to shake her head. 'Never,' she cried. 'I'd rather die here than feel your arms about me!'

She thought he sighed, but after a pause she heard sounds of him dismounting and before she could protest, was swept up in an ungentle embrace and tossed into the saddle.

'Then sit up there in lonely state, you stupid Sassenach,' she was told and had to clutch at the pommel to keep her seat as he jerked the reins abruptly and led Prince forward at a good pace.

As night fell they came in sight of the black silhouette of a house, and Jenna saw with relief the pale glow of a light shining from a window.

Alex was greeted like an old friend by the old couple within, while many curious glances were thrown at Jenna as he made some explanation in Gaelic for their arrival. Jenna looked about her surroundings, noting the earth floor and the low wall that divided them from a cow and her calf, while overhead a low clucking and the sound of wings being flapped told her that the croft's chickens were roosting in the rafters, and felt all her distaste for such rude accommodation returning in force.

The old woman turned from the open fire in the middle of the room and offered her a dish. Hunger overcame her scruples and Jenna accepted it and began to eat eagerly. However she backed when the woman took her hand and led her to a bed, arranged like a cupboard against one wall.

Strong fingers nipped her arm above the elbow. 'Smile nicely. She's giving up her own bed for you,' came Alex's voice in her ear. 'Climb in, or I'll smack your face for you.'

Although he smiled and nodded at the old couple,

Jenna did not doubt that he would carry out his threat, and a smouldering glance from his angry gaze sent her scrambling into the depths of the box-bed.

The tall Highlander caught at her skirts. 'Do you usually go to bed with your shoes on?' he asked, and snatched them from her feet and then tore off her wet stockings and threw them to the woman who hung them over the fire. Jenna shuffled to the far side as Alex unexpectedly joined her and pulled the doors to, leaving only a small gap open.

Jenna pushed at him. 'Go away!' she hissed. 'Don't touch me!'

'How you must value your attractions,' he marvelled. 'After your exhibition this afternoon I'd rather take that old body yonder to my bed than you. I've no liking for an English virago. Shrews hold no attraction for me, Miss Winslow.'

With the words he turned on his side, and soon his breathing proclaimed that he was either asleep or pretending to be. Slowly Jenna relaxed, huddled in her corner so that she made no contact with the man beside her. In spite of her exhaustion, sleep was hard to find and she lay awake, staring into the thick darkness, bitter tears coursing down her cheeks as she faced the ending to all her hopes.

At last she fell into a fitful sleep; but was awake at once as Alex moved, flung back the harsh blanket and reached to slide back the bed doors. Under half-closed lids she watched him leave the bed and cross the room to open the shutters that covered the window. The dim light of early morning crept into the interior and somewhere in the room she heard the old people stir. Unwilling to face the day ahead, Jenna curled into a tight ball in her corner of the bed and resolutely closed her eyes. Almost at once, it seemed, a hand shook her shoulder

and as she sat up sleepily, a bowl of porridge was thrust into her hands.

Looking about she saw that the light from the window was much stronger, and she realised that she must have fallen asleep after Alex left the bed. In the privacy of the box-bed, safe from interested eyes behind its doors, she clasped her hands round her knees and stared thoughtfully out of the window. Beyond her refuge she could identify the sounds of someone going about their domestic chores; there were sounds of twigs enthusiastically brushing the hearth, then the old woman came into Jenna's sight as she crossed to the door and vigorously shook a rag rug just beyond the entrance.

The English girl knew she should offer her help, but found herself totally unable to leave the security of the bed and face the outside world. Suddenly the doorway was darkened and after a few words were exchanged, footsteps approached and the door of her refuge was pulled noisily aside.

'Get up,' commanded Alex and as Jenna shrank away, reached in, seized her wrist and dragged her from the nest of blankets. Releasing her immediately her feet touched the floor, he turned to the woman watching silently and tossed her a coin.

'*Tapadh leat*,' he said gently, and Jenna knew that he was thanking her for her hospitality.

Once outside the house, Jenna was surprised to see two new horses and recognising two of the men from Tenafroich, realised that they must have arrived while she slept. Alex obviously gave a message to one of them, who then saluted his chief and rode off along the way they had travelled yesterday. The second man mounted his horse, but instead of riding away, reached down his hand to Jenna.

'You will ride pillion behind Johnnie,' said Alex

briefly, climbing into his own saddle and setting off along the road away from Tenafroich.

Reflecting that their positions seemed almost reversed and that now *he* was taking her away from his home, Jenna obeyed somewhat helplessly, feeling bemused by the turn of events. A plaid had been folded for her to sit on, and with a practised twist of his arm the manservant quickly had her up behind him. Settling her skirts, Jenna tucked her hand into the broad leather belt he wore and they started forward, following Alex, who was already far ahead.

Apparently intent upon travelling as far as possible. Alex rode at a steady speed, pausing for nothing, until Jenna was stiff and weary, her muscles aching from the constant movement. At last, when she was almost too tired to retain her seat, she felt a change in their pace and lifting her head saw a tall tower perched upon a rock that jutted out into the loch bordering their path.

This was evidently their destination, for Alex gave a loud 'halloo', and urging his horse to greater speed, charged up to the gate, waving his hat above his head.

Their arrival had been seen, for suddenly the great door of the Keep was opened and a figure ran down the steps. Alex jumped from the saddle and he and the other man hugged and patted each other, making no effort to hide their pleasure in meeting. Jenna watched their display of affection with a jaundiced eye until a retainer came up and offered her his assistance in descending. At last Alex turned and, seeing her standing uncertainly behind him, reached an arm and brought her forward.

'Let me present my friend, Sir Jaimie Davidson,' he began, but the other waved his words aside.

'No one told me you were married,' he said.

'I'm not,' Alex told him baldly. 'This is my bedfellow, Mistress Jenna Winslow.'

Jenna felt a blaze of fiery mortification flood her face with colour, but after an almost imperceptible pause, Sir Jaimie took her hand and bowed as though nothing untoward had occurred. Recovering her composure a little, she followed his lead and curtsied with trembling legs.

'You must be tired after your journey,' he went on. 'Go with my wife, who will make you comfortable.'

He indicated a plump woman in the last stages of pregnancy, who had appeared in the doorway and was now making her way carefully down the steps. Eager to leave the scene, Jenna hurried to meet her.

'My lady,' she said, bobbing another curtsey.

The other woman smiled, her rather plain face good-humoured and kind. 'Did I hear Alex was wed at last?' she asked, turning to retrace her steps.

'He introduced me as his bedfellow' Jenna told her bitterly.

Lady Davidson paused to look at her. 'Did he so?' she said, not at all shocked. 'But then, Cousin Alex could always summon up a biting tongue when he had a mind.'

It was Jenna's turn to inspect the other. 'Cousin Alex?' she repeated.

'Oh, yes. Our mothers were sisters.'

'I—see.' All hope that she might have found an ally vanished.

As they entered the great hall of the Keep they were surrounded by a group of children, ranging from a toddler barely able to keep his feet, through several of an intermediate age to a pretty, solemn girl of about eight.

'All mine,' claimed Lady Davidson with an enveloping gesture. 'And this,' taking a baby from a nurse, 'is the wee bairn soon to be dispossessed from his position.'

Jenna could only admire the healthy, lively brood. 'How lucky you are,' she cried honestly.

'Aye—so far I've not lost one. But come away—you must be longing to wash away the stains of travel, and to tell the truth I'm eager to get acquainted myself. It's not often we have the luxury of visitors, especially in the winter.'

Jenna was not one to make friends quickly, but there was something very likeable about Margaret Davidson; while she knew instinctively that Alex had her loyalty and that the other woman would not betray him in any way she felt that here could be a *confidante*.

Later that evening, when dinner was over and the ladies had retired to what Margaret called her 'bower', she listened to Jenna's story with interest and replied frankly. 'I declare it's as good as a play—but I'm sure you'll remember we're kin, and not ask me to betray Alex's trust in any way.' She smiled warmly at the other girl. 'But we'll be friends for all that, and if I can help you in any other way, just ask.'

She looked at Jenna speculatively, noting the troubled brow and unhappy mouth. 'He's a good man, my dear. I'll grant that he can be ruthless and arrogant, but circumstances have made him so. Life in the wilds of America cannot have been easy. When a boy has had to fight for survival you cannot expect the man to be anything but hard.'

Jenna had to admit the sense of her words and wished she had the courage to mention Morag's claim that he had provided the necessities for her machinations, but the knowledge of Alex's ultimate betrayal was too painful to share, and she turned the conversation away from her own troubles. Lady Davidson was only too eager to talk about her growing family, and soon the English girl was acquainted with the children's foibles and talents, also their faults, for Margaret was far from a doting mother.

The men sat over their whisky, and Jenna was asleep long before Alex came to bed. When she opened her eyes at first light and looked drowsily around the room, she sat up in alarm, thinking a stranger had entered and made himself at home. A tall man was by the dressing-table shrugging himself into a coat of nut-brown velvet. At her movement he turned his head a little, meeting her eyes in the mirror as he flicked out the lace at his cuffs and collar.

Alex's red hair gleamed with a bright fire as he bowed slightly. 'I trust you slept well,' he said ironically.

Jenna ignored the pleasantry. 'I didn't recognise you,' she said, eyeing him with open curiosity.

'We Highlanders have to leave our tartans behind when we are near a town, otherwise we are liable to arrest, and that, my dear Jenna, is why you see me attired like any foppish gentleman.'

Jenna thought he looked far from a fop in the smooth brown velvet, his red hair tied back by black ribbon. Gold buttons gleamed as he moved, and from the depths of his snowy cravat a single diamond glinted. She had to admit that with his quiet elegance he could have been taken for a member of any London club. Thinking of her worn tartan skirt and blue bodice, she was dismayed at the comparison she would make, and as though reading her thoughts he gave a nod towards a chair in the corner of the room.

'Margaret thought you might have need of some garments—I explained how you left so quickly without a thought of packing.'

'I have already acquainted her with the circumstances,' Jenna told him defiantly and saw his face tighten at the news. 'Don't worry,' she went on, 'she is loyal to her family and says she won't help me to escape you—but we are friends for all that.'

His expression softened. 'Margaret is a dear girl—without the claims of kinship she would still hold a special place in my heart, and her husband is my childhood friend.' For a moment he looked down at her, his expression unfathomable, then: 'I'm glad you like her,' he said abruptly, and made to leave the room, pausing with one hand on the door latch.

'The Davidsons have sent out runners inviting people to a gathering—so prepare yourself to meet lots of my kinsmen.'

She stared at him aghast. 'I'd—rather not.'

Alex MacKenzie smiled. 'You have no choice in the matter,' he told her, grim amusement in his voice. 'The house will be full by tomorrow. The entertainment will be a little more formal than our dance and *ceilidh* and you, my dear Jenna, *will* be on show.'



CHAPTER NINE

'YOU don't care for the idea,' Margaret said later that day, after one glance at her guest's face. 'Oh, dear, and I was so excited at the thought of a little social life. I *cannot* cancel it—the men have gone with the summons.'

Her expression was so woebegone and her disappointment so obvious that Jenna felt impelled to assure her that she quite liked the thought of meeting hers and Alex's relations. 'Though I must confess that I suspect that he intends to humiliate me, by introducing me as his woman or his bedfellow,' she went on.

'Surely not—anyway, I'm sure none would take a great deal of notice if he did. We are all much too used to hand-fastings and common law wives to be much bothered by the lack of civil or religious ceremonies.'

'I—find it humiliating,' Jenna murmured, her head hanging. 'While he seems to *revel* in it!'

'Well, I expect it makes him feel a bit of a dog,' Margaret said practically, before insisting that they should raid her storerooms and choose a length of material to make Jenna a dress.

'My woman will start at once and have it finished in time for the banquet,' she told the English girl with assurance, adding with a teasing smile. 'I know fine that it will look grand—but take my advice and don't be too energetic in the reels, the stitching'll no' be of the very best.'

Jenna gazed at the rolls of material and her heart filled

with gratitude; until that moment she had been almost unaware of how much she missed rich silks and fine clothes and the feel of soft linen against her body, but suddenly she was filled with elation at the thought of owning a new gown. After much indecision and delicious consultation a red moiré silk was chosen with cream ribbons and ruffles as decoration.

Impulsively Jenna hugged the donor and received a quick kiss in return.

'Oh, thank you—thank you!' she cried.

That day, while the material was cut and sewed and fitted, she saw continual traffic arriving at the door of the castle and knew a growing trepidation at the thought of meeting so many strangers; something which would have bothered her not at all a few months ago.

The sewing-room was large and light, with a fire large enough to keep the maids' fingers warm and nimble, and soon the dress began to take shape, the bodice long and narrow, while the wide scarlet skirts were spread over a cream petticoat. By the evening of the second day it only wanted a double row of lace to finish the bodice and a few stitches around the hem.

Later that night when she put it on and looked in the glass Jenna knew that the gown was a success beyond her dreams. With her dark hair shining and a fan decorated with ostrich feathers and crystals she knew herself that she looked like someone from a fairy story. The look on Alex's face when he saw her filled her with satisfaction as she descended the staircase and allowed him to take her hand down the last few steps.

'You do me honour,' he said as he led her forward, and she knew with a leap of her heart that the compliment was sincere. Pausing before entering the room where the guests were assembled, he drew her into a dark corner of the hall.

'A word of advice, mistress,' he said and she knew by the tone of his voice that their warring was very far from over. 'These people are my kith and kin—don't think to belittle them with your city ways or give yourself grand airs. And if you're wise, you'll no' be telling them stories—'

Jenna lifted her chin. 'I shall only tell the truth,' she said coldly, 'which, if your kinsmen are honourable will do you no good at all, Alex MacKenzie!'

His fingers tightened round her wrist. 'Do you think to tell them anything new, mistress? I'm surprised you did not hear them laughing last night, as I recounted the tale of how the Usurper of Hourn's heiress was tamed and brought to heel!'

Jenna stared up at him, white with anger and dismay. 'And you expect me to meet such people?' she cried. 'I shall go back to my room—'

She swung away, but was brought up short by the grip on her wrist. 'You'll make your curtsey to my folk,' she was told in a voice that brooked no argument, 'and with a good grace—or the company will be entertained by the sight of you across my knee.'

Jenna closed her eyes against the vision invoked and shuddered, knowing that MacKenzie was quite capable of carrying out his threat. 'H-how I dislike and despise you,' she said forcefully, trembling with rage.

'I'm no' so keen on you myself,' Alex assured her, and taking her obedience for granted led her towards the open door of the great hall.

Lights and music and the cheerful hum of conversation spilled out of the crowded room. As they entered the noise died away and the entire company turned to stare in their direction. Well aware of their appraising eyes upon her Jenna gathered her courage round her like a cloak and with head held high, sank into an elaborate

court curtsey, her wide skirts billowing about her like the petals of a rose.

Alex's hand helped her to rise and then her fingers were tucked into the elbow of his green satin sleeve, and held firmly in place while he led her towards a group of richly dressed people.

'I thought you Scots were impoverished by your rebellion,' she murmured, eyeing the glitter of diamonds and shimmer of costly clothes. 'Or was it only the lower class who gave their all?'

'Mind your manners,' he warned her for her ears alone. 'Keep a civil tongue in your head, or tonight will be spoken of for years to come.'

'I wouldn't give you the satisfaction of humiliating me,' Jenna told him, smiling sweetly and bobbing a curtsey as they reached the seated group.

She was introduced to so many people, her hand kissed so many times during the next hour or so and her health drunk so often that her head began to reel, and she began to wish for nothing so much as a cool drink and a quiet moment.

'Let me find you a glass of lemonade and a seat,' a voice said behind her as she stood alone for a moment, Alex being involved in an animated conversation with a long-unseen cousin. Turning, she was surprised to see a man standing behind her in the full regimentals of an English soldier.

Reading her amazement, he smiled and made a bow.

'Captain Augustus West, ma'am,' he said, his accent music in her ears. 'I understand we are fellow countrymen.'

'Oh yes,' Jenna breathed, almost at a loss for words. 'But what are you doing here—and dressed like that?'

He laughed. 'The Davidsons are my friends. I do assure you that it's not unusual for me to visit them and

as for this—' He glanced down at his red coat and gold frogging, 'I will not hide what I am. Most folk accept me, I find. After all, the rebellion was twenty years ago.'

'Old animosities die hard,' Jenna told him bitterly.

He looked down at her gravely. 'I am sorry that you should find it so.'

'I do indeed—' From behind a hand closed over her upper arm with unexpected force, the fingers biting into her flesh warningly.

'Ah, Augustus, let me present my kinsman Alex MacKenzie, I don't believe you've met,' said Sir Jaimie easily, while Alex drew Jenna back against himself and away from the proximity of the redcoat.

'I gather you know Miss Winslow,' he said, a note of aggression in his tone.

'I took the liberty of introducing myself—the lady looked thirsty, and I offered my services.'

Alex's head came up in a manner that reminded Jenna strongly of a cock eyeing a rival. 'Well,' he said, 'I'll take care of that and leave you to have a grand conversation with Sir Jaimie here.'

'Really,' Jenna protested as she was led away, 'how could you be so rude?'

'Easily,' he retorted unequivocally. 'I'll no' have you running with tales to the Sassenachs.'

She tried to pull her arm free. 'We were *talking*.'

'Oh, aye—about how badly you're treated, no doubt. Well, I'll not have the redcoats riding down on Craighdarroch. If that's what you've been saying, your fine soldier in his brave coat will meet with an accident on his way back to Fort Augustus.'

Turning in his grasp, Jenna stared up at him in dismay at his threat.

'Oh, no!' she cried. 'I said nothing. *Truly*—we only spoke a few words. You wouldn't kill a man for that?'

He looked down at her grimly. 'I might,' he said, and she knew he was speaking the truth.

Her heart began to thud against her bodice and she must have grown pale for suddenly he thrust her down into a chair half-hidden behind a curtain and leaned over her, shielding her with his body from the gaze of the other guests.

'Take hold of yourself,' he whispered. 'I'll not have you swooning here.'

Jenna put a hand to her aching head and closed her eyes against the sight of the dancers flying past. 'You d-disgust me,' she whispered, her voice shaking. 'To talk of killing a man for such a reason—for *nothing*.'

'Tell me what was said, and if it was truly nothing then I'll let him live.'

She shuddered at the menace in his voice, but repeated as nearly as she could the innocuous conversation she had had with the soldier. He looked down into her face intently for a few seconds and then shrugged.

'I'll let the laddie live, then,' he said carelessly. 'And if you've recovered from the vapours, milady, you and I shall show ourselves in a dance.'

'I'd rather not,' she said coldly, but was ruthlessly pulled to her feet and on to the dance floor, where a set was forming.

'*Dance*,' Alex commanded as the music began, and unwilling to make a scene Jenna was obliged to obey, dancing between the long line of couples with the tall Highlander a watchful presence at her side.

Smiling and nodding to her new acquaintances, thinking with half her mind of pleasantries to say while the other part was busy with her own situation, Jenna went through the rest of the evening like a well-behaved automaton. At last she awoke to the fact that she was bone weary, her legs aching with dancing and that the heat

from the many candles and the smell of so much humanity crowded together threatened to fill her with nausea. Looking at her partner, she realised that it was Alex, and clutched at his sleeve as her head spun.

She could do no more than murmur inarticulately and lay her giddy head on his chest. At once his arm was firm round her waist, and grateful for his strength she leaned against him and closed her eyes on the madly gyrating scene. Voices spoke above her head, question and answer, and then she was swept off her feet and carried through the hovering throng.

She was dimly aware that they were climbing the stairs and then of being laid on a bed. Glass chinked against glass, and she was raised against Alex's shoulder.

'Drink this,' he said, and held a glass against her lips.

Jenna shuddered and turned her head aside. '*Oh—lord, I feel sick,*' she murmured, and felt beads of perspiration break out on her upper lip.

'You'll feel better if you take a little brandy,' came Alex's calm tone, and again the glass was presented insistently.

Weakly, Jenna sipped the fiery liquid, and at last was laid back against the pillows. After some moments the stimulant took effect and she opened her eyes cautiously in case the world was still spinning. At first she thought she was alone, but then became aware that Alex was leaning against the post at the foot of the bed, half hidden by the folds of the curtain. His glance was thoughtful as he regarded her, his arms folded.

'Are you breeding?' he asked baldly.

The ready colour flooded Jenna's cheeks made a denial useless, and he sighed with something like satisfaction.

'We'll away home then—and arrange a visit from the Minister,' he said.

Jenna forgot her malady and sat up. 'Why?' she demanded.

'So that we can be married, of course, you daft woman.'

She opened her mouth in preparation for angry talk, but then a means of vengeance so perfect and complete came to her, in a flash of inspiration, that she held her breath in awe, her eyes and mouth wide. Alex had turned away and did not notice her preoccupation as he worked out his own arrangements.

'Once I explain the situation,' he went on, 'no one will wonder at your indisposition, and we can away without any comment beyond such congratulations as are necessary—the Davidsons will be delighted. Margaret has long told me I should be setting up a nursery.'

'You already have a son,' Jenna reminded him, her voice bleak.

Alex looked at her over his shoulder. 'But not on the right side of the blanket.'

Jenna concealed her disgust and looked at him. 'And that's important?'

'Oh, aye—it makes a difference.'

She slid across the bed and stood up on the side away from him. 'Ring for the maid,' she said, 'I would go to bed.'

'Do you need a maid? I'll act the part as I have before. . . .'

Across the bed, her arms folded over her breast, she faced him. 'No,' she said baldly, and for a moment thought he would force her.

For a second his mouth tightened as it always did when any of his wishes were thwarted, but then his eyes travelled over her weary figure and his own stance relaxed. 'Very well,' he said. 'I can see you are tired. . . if you do not mind I will join the men below.'

Unexpectedly he took her hand and kissed it before he left the room, leaving Jenna with the impression that she was a good little girl and had been suitably rewarded. As soon as she was alone, she dashed the back of her hand against her scarlet skirts in an attempt to remove the caress, but the touch of his lips remained on her skin as if burned there, even after she had washed and was in bed.

Lying sleepless against her pillows, she was consumed by a wild rage against the man who treated her with so little compassion or understanding; to him she was only worthy of becoming his wife because she was carrying his baby. The thought of being considered as a chattel, as only a mother to his children and not a person in her own right, filled Jenna with wrath, and as a means of assuaging her frustration she fell to planning her revenge.

The plan had presented itself to her in its entirety; at the time it had seemed perfect, and even now, looked at from all angles, she could find no flaw in it. Hugging herself with pleasurable anticipation she stared into the darkness, and enacted the imagined scene in her mind until she finally fell asleep satisfied by the thought of the dreadful downfall of Alex MacKenzie, and how his pride would suffer before his friends and retainers.

Jenna slept late the next day, finding when she awoke that, so eager was he to return home, Alex had already set the proceedings for their journey into motion. Her tartan skirt and blue bodice were set out for her to wear and the maid had already packed the clothes and toiletries Margaret had generously given her. Just as she finished dressing, Lady Davidson came hurrying into the room. Folding her into a warm embrace, she kissed her fondly.

'Jenna, my dear, Alex has told me your news—how delighted I am, but why did you not tell me?'

'I hadn't even told Alex.'

'I understand that you wished him to be the first to know, and I daresay you wanted to hug the news to yourself for a little longer. How excited you must be! Alex is away home to arrange the wedding.'

'Yes.' Jenna turned away to stare out of the window.

The other raised her eyebrows at the baldness of the statement, giving the English girl an astute glance. 'Are you not happy at the prospect?'

Jenna did not turn round. 'I would have . . . preferred to be wed before I was pregnant. I feel I have had to pass a test to prove me worthy of being a MacKenzie bride.'

Margaret looked a little taken aback by her outburst and patted her arm comfortingly. 'I'm sure it's not like that. Alex is very fond of you—he told me so himself.'

'Until I conceived he had no intention of marrying me. He wants a son who will bear his name, and has no thought for me beyond the fact that I carry his child.'

'Then why did he not marry this Morag you have told me about?' Margaret asked quietly, and for a moment Jenna was nonplussed.

'I—daresay he thought her not well-born enough,' she answered loftily.

'I think you underestimate Alex,' Margaret told her. 'He is proud of his own birth, but would never look down on that of others.'

The English girl was silent, knowing that she spoke the truth, but unwilling to admit to the Highlander having any good points.

'Well,' the other went on brightly, having waited for a reply, 'I'll come to see you as soon as my babe is born, and doubtless Alex will bring you in the late summer after your own child arrives.'

Jenna thanked her gravely, and suddenly Margaret threw her arms around her, and hugged her warmly.

'Think of me as your friend,' she urged, 'and do not look so forlorn. If you should have need of me, I shall do my best to come—and Alex is a *good* man, take my word for it. Arrogant and ruthless perhaps, but only if the need arises. He's the child of his ancestors and upbringing, when to survive men had to be strong.' She looked into Jenna's face shrewdly. 'And you my dear, would not care for a soft husband. Take my advice and make it up with him before your quarrel goes too far to be healed.'

'He regards me only as a mother for his child.'

'He has asked no one else to marry him,' the other pointed out quietly, and something quickly veiled in her eyes made Jenna wonder if her affection for Alex went beyond cousinly fondness. But Lady Davidson was speaking again.

'How charming you look in your Highland costume,' she commented. 'Grand gowns can make one feel a queen, but there's a delight in simplicity which is very pleasing.'

Jenna glanced down at her short tartan skirt and smoothed the blue wool of her bodice, realising the unexpected pleasure she had in the homely garments. She was surprised to discover that she felt more at ease in them, than she had in the formal brocades and silks which once had been her usual dress.

Reading her startled expression, Margaret smiled. 'We'll make a Highland lady of you yet,' she promised.

The journey back to Heather House was tedious and uncomfortable, the weather being still cold and raw with a dampness that ate into the travellers' bones and made the roads a quagmire of half-frozen mud. At last they mounted the last hill before Craigdarroch and pausing there, gazed down at the grey pile that was Hourn tower, keeping sentinel beside the sea. Nearer at hand the little strung-out cottages of the village were guarded by their

cluster of oak trees, and beyond by the bend in the rough track could be seen the house of Tenafroich.

Unexpectedly Jenna felt a lift of her spirits. Under any other circumstances she would have thought she was glad to be home, but she refused to allow herself such feelings and resolutely quelled such traitorous emotions.

Surreptitiously glancing across to Alex, she saw an expression on his face as he leaned forward over his mount's neck, that matched her own hastily-hidden gladness. Turning Princess back on to the path, she plunged down before he could become aware of her feelings and led the way to Craigdarroch.

The village had appeared asleep, but at their approach doors opened and people hastily poured out to meet their returning chieftain. To her surprise Jenna found herself included in their greeting; her hand being taken as she was welcomed in solemn Gaelic tones. Touched, she found herself smiling with genuine pleasure for the first time in many days and used her few words of Gaelic to return the crofter's greeting. Suddenly aware of eyes upon her, she turned her head to meet Alex's thoughtful gaze and at once the animation withered, the light left her face and she fell silent as they left the villagers behind and continued the last few yards of their journey.

Mrs Grant was at the door, her face wreathed in smiles as she dropped a stiff curtsey.

'Welcome home, master and mistress,' she proclaimed before dispensing with formality and clasping them both in a warm embrace. 'Come away in,' she urged, wiping away tears of happiness with the corner of her snowy apron. 'You must be frozen and hungry—just.' Still babbling happily, she led the way into the parlour where a table was laid in front of a blazing fire. 'Now, the Minister is coming a week tomorrow, so you'll be wed before the New Year.'

Pausing, she gazed from one to the other, evidently expecting some sigh of pleasure from them. Her face fell at Jenna's lack of enthusiasm. 'Have you no' made up?' she cried in dismay. 'I ken fine you were no' exactly friendly when you left, but I expected to see a pair of lovebirds returning—especially when you're getting wed and all.'

'Losh, woman, we've lived together for months and Jenna is expecting my bairn, we're hardly a new-betrothed couple! But we'll share a kiss, if it'll please you.' With the words he pulled Jenna to him and roughly planted a kiss on her lips.

Involuntarily she drew back and his arms tightened. Holding her prisoner he tilted her chin with one hand and smiled down into her eyes. 'We'll have no maidenly modesty,' he told her, 'but continue as we have before.' And again his mouth closed over hers in a lingering kiss, this time one that stirred her more than she cared to admit.

Breaking away hastily, she turned to where the house-keeper had been, in time to see the door closing behind her as she discreetly left the room.

'No succour there, Jenna,' Alex observed behind her, and she flushed that he had so easily read her thoughts. 'Come to the fire and warm yourself,' he went on, taking her cloak when she reluctantly joined him.

Kneeling in front of her chair he removed her wet shoes and began to chafe her cold feet between his warm hands. Something in the homely action disturbed her, threatening her new-found calm.

'Don't,' she said abruptly, and he looked up at her still clasping her stocking feet.

'I mean it, Jenna,' he said with emphasis. 'We'll live together as man and wife—both before and after the Minister has paid us a visit.' He held her gaze steadily

and after a moment Jenna dragged her eyes away, knowing that if her plan was to succeed she must appear compliant and amenable while inwardly rebelling. . . . And yet his hands were kind and his attentions pleasurable.

Steeling herself against such treacherous thoughts and concentrating on his liaison with Morag and involvement in her spell-making, she grew calmer and could view him objectively.

'I don't really have much choice,' she sighed, watching through her lashes.

Alex showed his teeth in a grin. 'No,' he agreed. 'Don't try and fight me—I always win.'

'Not this time,' Jenna thought exultantly, but hid her exhilaration behind her downcast eyes and allowed her shoulders to assume a dejected droop.

'Don't look so despondent,' he advised kindly, the condescending note in his voice making her grit her teeth. 'I'll no' make such a bad husband, you'll not find me harsh—'

Jenna had been unable to resist sending him a speaking look and he broke off abruptly to reach forward and imprison her chin again. With fingers that hurt a little he shook her head, forcing her to meet his gaze.

His own eyes were sharp and astute, reminding her that the man was far from being a fool, even if at the moment he was complacent and sure of his victory over her.

'Play me false, miss,' he said slowly, 'and I'll make you rue your actions, be sure of that.'

Deliberately Jenna made her eyes limpid. 'Why, Alex, do you think me stupid?' she murmured. 'I know you have no liking for insipid females, for you have often told me so, but I fear you may have acquired one. I—suddenly find I have no wish to leave Tenafroich, its

walls have become security to me. I feel I am at home.'

She had spoken without thinking, hoping to allay his suspicions, but realised as she spoke that the words were true. Heather House, with its stout stone walls and narrow windows, recessed against the bitter weather, was more dear to her than all the many houses she had occupied during her life. Looking at the candlelight flickering over the panelled walls and heavy furniture, while the fire burned with a warm glow in the wide fireplace, she was filled with a surprising contentment, despite the presence of the man whom she had vowed to hate.

'I could almost believe that you mean that.' His quiet words hung in the air and she turned to look at him.

The room was poorly lit, shadows flickering across his tanned face, giving him almost an air of longing. Smiling a little at such a fancy, she answered truthfully. 'But I do, my dear Alex. But I do.'

The MacKenzie put out a hand and would have spoken, but at that moment Mrs Grant entered with a laden tray and the moment was lost, leaving Jenna with a strange longing to know what it was Alex had been about to say.



CHAPTER TEN

THE days flew by and suddenly Jenna realised with a shock that Christmas was almost upon them. It had been something of a surprise to come upon Meg Grant poring over a book of recipes in the hope of finding out the secrets of mince-pie making.

'I ken fine that you English celebrate Christmas,' she said, 'and I wanted to make you feel at home.'

'How kind,' Jenna answered, concealing the fact that the season had quite escaped her. 'I think I can remember how to make them, though we should really have made the mincemeat some weeks ago. However, if we use the old-fashioned recipe with mutton as well as fruit, it should be all right.'

Later that day she turned over her small stock of possessions with the idea of finding presents for the inhabitants of Heather House. While at the Davidson's Keep she had taken the opportunity of purchasing some lengths of ribbon from a pedlar, and now selected a length of cherry-coloured satin which she felt sure would please the housekeeper. Mary Smith, the little maid of all work, was easily settled, too; Margaret Davidson had given her several dresses and among them was a dark green wool which with a few tucks would fit the young girl. But Alex was much more difficult. Jenna could not leave him out without arousing his suspicions, but what to give him she had no idea. At last, recalling the ancient and decrepit purse he used when he wore trews, she resolved to make him a new one, and with this in mind

searched until she had found a piece of heavy velvet and silk to line it.

She intended merely to cobble it quickly, but somehow, try how she would, her pride in her own workmanship made her take care, sewing with neat stitches and straight seams, last of all embroidering the initials A. M. with gold thread pulled from the hem of a length of Indian muslin Lady Davidson had given her.

'Too good for you, wretched man,' she muttered crossly to herself as she folded the finished article and hid it in one of her drawers. 'I must be mad making such a thing.'

'Or in love,' whispered her treacherous heart, causing her to stand still for a moment while she considered the possibility with shocked surprise.

'Nonsense!' she told herself firmly, and resolutely put aside all such foolish thoughts.

On Christmas morning she was surprised to find a large bundle beside her breakfast plate and looked uncertainly from Meg Grant, stirring porridge over the fire, to Alex, who was examining the weather from the kitchen window.

'There's my present, *mo ghaiol*,' said the housekeeper answering her unspoken question, as she dropped a linen square into her lap.

The handkerchief was exquisitely embroidered in white, and Jenna was genuine in her pleasure as she thanked the older woman before turning her attention to the bundle on the table, which could only be from Alex.

Her heart beating a light tattoo, she undid the covering with fingers that trembled and found a pair of shoes of soft leather, the heels fashionably red and the high vamps decorated by a pair of fine silver buckles. Jenna gazed at them, so filled with delight that she forgot who

was their donor. Drawing a quivering breath, she bent to slip them on, turning and arching her feet the better to admire them.

'How did you know they are what I wanted above all else?' she asked ingenuously.

'It was not hard.' Alex answered dryly, and recalling who had bestowed the gift the English girl felt some of her pleasure ebbing away.

'They'll do to dance in at your wedding,' he went on, and staring down at her fine new shoes Jenna almost gave up her plans for revenge. Suddenly the wish to see the Highlander humiliated seemed unimportant, but even as she took a breath, he spoke again.

'As my bride you must look your best.'

Jenna raised her eyes. 'Is that why you gave them to me?'

Sensing trouble he paused. 'Not—entirely. I know you had need of them, but you must know that I wish to be proud of my wife.'

'I don't count pride as a virtue, Alex MacKenzie,' she answered coldly. 'If I need new shoes for you to be proud of me, either I'm a poor catch or you are easily satisfied.'

Alex sighed. 'Jenna, Jenna,' he said quietly, 'why are we quarrelling? I merely meant that I wanted you to look your best—'

'You make it sound like a cattle mart,' she cried indignantly. 'Shall I be expected to show my teeth, or will they be satisfied when you tell them that I'm pregnant?'

'If I was not aware that your condition makes women unreasonable—'

'Of course you are an expert upon such things, are you not?'

Alex fell silent, obviously holding his temper in rein with difficulty. 'Jenna, today is Christmas, we are doing

our best to make it special for you. You have just received presents, and yet you are behaving like a spoilt child.'

The reasonable note in his voice, the attempt at patience with which he spoke, drove Jenna beyond control. Jumping to her feet, she dragged the purse she had made out of her pocket and threw it on the table.

'There,' she cried. 'You are not the only one to give presents.' Swinging on her heel with a swirl of petticoats, she thrust a packet into Meg Grant's hand and ran from the room.

Bursting into her bedroom, she found Mary Smith in the act of folding and putting away the green wool dress which she had deliberately left out of the press.

'Leave it out, Mary—I meant it for you.'

The girl stared at her, her eyes wide in astonishment. 'For me, miss?' she wondered.

'Yes. In England we give presents at Christmas. I thought you'd like it—your mother or Grannie could make it fit you quite easily.'

The girl stared from her to the dress, her expression more dismayed than pleased, and Jenna's eyebrows drew together in a puzzled frown.

'Don't you want it?' she asked, gently.

'Oh, miss, don't I just—but I don't deserve it.'

'Nonsense,' Jenna told her roundly, 'Of course you do. You're a good, helpful girl—' She stopped in surprise as the girl burst into noisy tears. 'Oh, Mary,' she cried, exasperated by the unexpected response to her gift, 'don't be such a silly child. Here take it,' and rolling it into a rough bundle, she thrust it into the girl's arms and gave her a little push towards the door.

Going to the window once she was alone, Jenna leaned against the frame and gazed out at the grey scene without seeing the rain which ran steadily down the

narrow panes of glass, but the general air of damp depression fitted her mood very well. How often had she wished for a kind word or gesture from Alex MacKenzie during the last weeks—and now that it had come in the form of the shoes, she found herself more at odds with him than ever. Bitterly disillusioned and hurt, she fanned her own anger in order to hide her pain, brooding resentfully on his ill-treatment of her, deliberately ignoring any kind action or tender moment.

'I'll make you sorry,' she muttered, twisting her fingers together. 'Oh, I'll make you so sorry—you'll wish you'd never met me.'

But somehow the vow failed to bring her the pleasure she had imagined it would and unaccountable tears filled her eyes.

'I came to say *tapadh lelt* for the purse,' said a voice quietly from the door.

Knowing the Highlander's ability for moving without a sound, she wondered how long he had been there. Blinking rapidly to clear her eyes, she gazed out of the window, her head high. '*Tapadh lelt?*' she repeated. 'What does that mean?'

'Thank you—may you be a hero, to be exact.'

She gave a broken laugh. 'You Scots never say exactly what you mean.'

'We do at times.' Pushing his shoulders away from the doorpost, he came towards her. 'For instance, Jenna, I meant every word when I said we would live together.'

The words were quietly spoken, but clear and firm, hanging in the air between them as she breathed on the window pane and concentrated on drawing a figure with her extended finger.

'Look at me, Jenna,' commanded the voice in the same tones.

Knowing he was waiting implacably, she completed

the little sketch, which had become a kilted Highlander, before turning to obey him, every trace of her tears gone as she faced him steadily.

For a moment their eyes met and clashed with a hint of antagonism, then he reached out and hooked one finger into the top of her stiff bodice, drawing her slowly but inevitably towards him.

'With all that implies,' he went on, his arms closing round her.

His breath fanned her cheek and of its own volition her face turned up to meet his. His kiss sent an exquisite thrill down her spine, surprising her by the strength of her own response. 'Jenna, Jenna,' he whispered against her lips. 'Whatever happens, however much we quarrel, we'll always have this between us.'

Dismayed by his power to arouse her, Jenna knew that he was right, admitting that the attraction he held for her went beyond resentment, and that no matter how much anger or hatred she felt for him, yet his touch, his kiss would reduce her to sensual compliance, longing for his caress.

'You see?' he demanded triumphantly, his eyes gleaming as he looked down at her flushed face. 'You are mine, Jenna Winslow, with or without the marriage lines.' For a moment longer he gazed down at her before setting her on her feet. 'But now is not the time—Meg sent me to tell you that the meal is on the table.'

Bewildered, Jenna looked up at him, her hands going automatically to her dishevelled hair. Watching her attempts to tidy herself, Alex's teeth showed in a smile, and reaching out a finger, he carelessly tucked away an end of ribbon that had emerged from her bodice. Then, giving her a nod, he went to hold the door for her.

Jenna followed him thoughtfully. Had he really made love to her merely to prove his mastery over her? she

wondered dully, too shaken and fraught to feel anything more than a deep unhappiness that overwhelmed all other emotions.

With first the wedding and then Hogmanay to provide for, the women of Tenafroich hurled themselves into an orgy of cooking. Never, Jenna thought, had she seen such mountains of pancakes and oat bannocks, never had so many joints of ham and mutton been boiled or so large a haunch of venison roasted over the kitchen fire. She worked at all the preparations with her mind deliberately blank, concentrating solely on the task in hand and never allowing herself to think beyond the moment when she would be revenged for all the humiliation and hurt Alex had made her suffer.

At last the day came; the Minister had ridden in the night before eager both for a welcoming dram and the forthcoming ceremony. Even now, well before noon, clansmen from the village were arriving. Jenna watched from the window as they straggled along the rough road, before turning back into the bedroom to finish dressing. She had chosen to wear the scarlet silk Lady Davidson had given her, but the face that looked back at her from the mirror was far different to the one she had seen on the night of the ball. *Then* she had looked her best. Now wide, dark eyes stared out of a pale face, the resolution in their depths only serving to enhance her air of frightened wretchedness.

Ever since Christmas Mary had behaved oddly, seeming almost to avoid the English girl, and now, when she was needed most, she was nowhere to be found. Mrs Grant was busy below and so Jenna had to dress herself, struggling with stay-strings and hooks and comforted by none of the feminine chatter which usually served to soothe a bride's nerves. At last she was ready, a glance in

the mirror told her that her gown was immaculate and her hair arranged perfectly and she sat down to await the call that would tell her that all was ready below.

Downstairs a door closed, footsteps could be heard mounting the stairs and a gentle tap came at the door.

'Miss Jenna—they're ready. We're waiting for you.'

Jenna shivered at the housekeeper's soft voice, a shudder shaking her slender form convulsively, but when she held out her hand and studied it, she was surprised to see that her fingers were quite steady. Licking dry lips, she stood up and shook out her wide skirts.

'I'm coming,' she answered, gratified to find her voice so firm and after one last searching glance in the mirror, crossed the room, opened the door and followed the sturdy form of Meg Grant down the stairs.

The ceremony was to be held in the parlour, and to Jenna's dazzled eyes, as she paused on the threshold, that room seemed crowded with people, their faces a sea of eyes and mouths as they turned to look at her. Returning their gazes gravely, she sank into a solemn curtsey, meeting Alex MacKenzie's eyes as she rose.

A way had been cleared for her and now she was passed from hand to hand, until she stood beside her prospective husband. His eyes held hers and for a moment they seemed alone in the crowded room. A pulse beat quickly in Jenna's throat and her breast rose and fell with her quick, shallow breathing.

Alex had put on full Highland dress, looking to her English eyes both magnificent and barbaric. Above the brilliant hues of his kilt a velvet jacket gleamed softly, made splendid by the silver buttons that adorned it and the jewelled brooch that held his folded plaid across one shoulder. Rich Mechlin lace frothed at his wrists and

neck, a black, silk ribbon at the nape of his neck held back his red hair. Jenna thought she had never seen anyone so handsome.

Bending over her hand, he carried it to his lips kissing it formally.

'Beautiful,' he murmured appreciatively for her ears alone, 'but need you look so cold and fearful?'

She shivered but said nothing, and after a moment he drew her to where the minister was waiting. As though from an enormous distance Jenna was aware that the ceremony had begun, but his words were meaningless, merely noises that echoed about her brain in a formless fashion. Suddenly she became aware that there was silence in the room, and that Alex's fingers had tightened around her hand.

Raising her head she stared at the man of God and after a pause he repeated the question he had obviously asked before.

'Jenna Elizabeth, wilt thou have this man. . . ?'

Now the moment had come she hesitated, unable to find her voice, while the occupants of the room waited expectantly for her reply. Aware of the silence behind and the tension of the man beside her, Jenna took a quick breath. Now was the moment when she would see her tormentor humbled, his harsh arrogance humiliated in front of his clansmen, his pride and honour destroyed.

Lifting her chin, she straightened her shoulders and turned to face the man beside her. 'No!' she said loudly, her voice clear and firm. 'No, I will not marry Alex MacKenzie.'

The people behind broke into an excited babble, but Jenna and Alex might have been alone. As she watched the Highlander's face grew white and taut, his mouth a grim line, his eyes narrow slits of blue ice. Suddenly more afraid than she had ever been in her life, Jenna

snatched her hand out of his grasp and picking up her scarlet skirts, ran from the room.

Up the stairs and into the safety of her bedroom she ran and turning to close the door, discovered him on her heels. With one hand he pushed her into the room, following her closely as she backed away.

'Dear God,' she thought as he towered over her, 'he's going to kill me!'

Crooked hands like talons reached out for her throat, and closing her eyes against the murderous rage in his face, Jenna was unable to control a whimper of fear that broke from her.

'You'll pay for that, woman, till the end of your life—but if I touch you now I'll kill you, and I want you to live long enough to regret the day you refused Alex MacKenzie.'

He finished speaking and the silence was unbearable. Opening her eyes, Jenna found him watching her, his nostrils flaring with the effort of self-control. He put out a hand and she started back at his movement, but was brought up short by the bed. Deliberately he reached out to her, enjoying the fear he read in her eyes, and slowly ran one finger down her cheek and throat, across her swelling bosom until with a suddenness that was startling in its suppressed violence, he hooked his fingers in her scarlet bodice and tore it to the waist in a single movement that jerked her off her feet.

By the time she had scrambled up from her knees she was alone. Clutching the torn edges of her bodice together, Jenna stumbled across the room and closed the door, pushing home the bolt with fingers that were stiff and trembling. On legs that barely supported her, she tottered to the bed and throwing herself face down, gave way to a passion of tears that left her mentally and physically exhausted. Now that she had taken her ven-

geance, she would have given anything to undo her action; there had been one moment when Alex had looked so stricken, with such deep hurt in his eyes, that she had longed for her words to be unsaid. Now that she had lost any right to his affection for ever, she realised how much it meant to her and cursed her own pride that had led her into such an ill-considered act.

Downstairs the hubbub rose even louder, voices laughed and shouted, songs were sung and the wild skirl of the pipes sounded over all, thrilling and savage, seeming to match the tumult of her emotions. She must have fallen asleep, for suddenly she was aware of movement below; footsteps tramped along the passage and then a noisy mob spilled out into the yard under her window, tramping across to the barn where the wedding feast had been set out.

From behind the narrow window frame, Jenna watched as lamps were lit and the windows and door of the long stone building sprang into prominence against the dark winter afternoon. Purple clouds obscured the surrounding mountains, hanging low over Tenafroich while they loosed their burden of icy rain.

For a while she surveyed the dismal scene. Half frozen rain, almost sleet, slithered down the window, sliding slowly until it met the covering of slushy ice on the window sill. Disconsolately she returned to the bed and sitting down abruptly, hugged her arms around her chest, suddenly conscious of the growing cold. How long she sat there she had no idea, but suddenly she became aware that the afternoon dusk had given way to evening, and the room was in darkness. Lifting her head she listened, but the carousel in the outbuildings had died away and all was silence, save for the pattering of icy pellets against the panes of the window.

With an effort Jenna aroused herself, reminded as she

lit a candle of Alex's lessons with a tinder box. After changing her torn dress for a tartan skirt and bodice and tidying her hair, she took the candle and resolutely went in search of the man she should have wed.

Silently she descended the stairs, her shadow walking behind her, monstrous and black. The door to the parlour stood open and she hesitated in the entrance, holding her candle high while she surveyed the room, wrinkling her nose at the disorder there. Empty plates and glasses littered the table and any object that could hold them; furniture was pushed aside, one stool even overturned in the hearth, and everywhere was a profusion of discarded bottles and leather-jacks.

With an expression of distaste she turned from the scene, and opening the kitchen door a little and peered in. Meg Grant was the only occupant, sitting by the table in the light of a single candle, her head in her hands. Jenna pulled the door to silently, and went on down the passage to the front door which stood wide open to the weather. Rain had beaten in, forming a puddle in the hollow worn by many feet in the doorstep.

Again she hesitated, eyeing the dim lights across the yard with apprehension. Then, suddenly resolute, she gathered up her skirts and before she could change her mind, ran across the wet cobbles and scurried in at the barn door.

A scene of unexpected calm met her astonished gaze, and she looked about her with parted lips and wide eyes; whatever she had expected it was not to see the chieftain and his guests sleeping amongst the hay like tired babies, or children exhausted after wild play. At her feet one brawny MacKenzie lay stretched out on his back, snoring loudly, while every nook and cranny held its sleeping occupant. Alex MacKenzie was seated at a table, his head cradled in his arms, his wedding finery a splash of

brilliant colour against the grey stone walls and dun straw.

On tiptoe Jenna went to him, breathing so quietly that her boned bodice hardly rose and fell. With her head on one side she considered the sleeping man, her expression enigmatic. Her face softened and she had put out one tentative hand when he stirred, and she paused ready for flight. Alex uttered something unintelligible and flung out an arm, knocking a flagon of wine to the floor. The stale smell of alcohol rose to Jenna's nostrils as the man in front of her breathed heavily, turning his face against his arms.

Disgust filled Jenna and she stared coldly down at him, her lip curling with scorn. Abruptly she spun on her heel, her skirts flaring about her, and hurried from the scene, storming across the yard impervious to the rain falling heavily.

The crash as she flung the door to behind her brought Meg out of the kitchen, and for a moment the two women confronted each other in the dark hall, lit only by the flickering candle the housekeeper held aloft.

At last the older woman spoke. 'Whether it's my place or no, I must speak. How could you treat the poor man so? To humiliate him in front of his clansmen.'

Jenna looked at her. 'Quite easily,' she told her uncompromisingly, and sailed past into the kitchen. 'The blow to his pride was less than many he has dealt me. Have you forgot Morag and her red-headed babe?'

Mrs Grant made a deprecating gesture. 'It's a man's way—' she began, but Jenna broke angrily across her words.

'Not *my* husband,' she retorted. 'The man I marry will keep only me.'

'Ye were no' married,' the housekeeper pointed out. 'And Morag has gone.'

'Gone?'

'Aye—Himself sent men while you were away who gave her money for herself and her child, and told her to remove herself and never to return to Craigdarroch.'

This gave Jenna pause. 'Did he so?' she asked quietly after a while. Assumed indifference warred with her natural curiosity, until at last the latter won and she asked where the girl had gone.

Meg Grant lifted her shoulders indifferently. 'Inverness, some said—others saw her heading north. She had kinsfolk in Sutherland. She'll have gone there. She will probably leave the babe with them—she's no' a good mother.'

And now Jenna felt pity for her erstwhile enemy. 'Poor woman,' she said. 'How could he have turned her out in this weather? The child was his, how could he treat his own son so cruelly?'

'Don't waste your pity on such as Morag. She'll survive.'

'But the baby—'

Mrs Grant snorted, a devisory note threw her nose. 'Twenty years' time, he'll be back here making trouble—and I don't need a crystal ball to say so.' She broke off to eye the English girl. 'Whatever made you do what you did, miss?' she asked soberly. 'I've never seen a man so taken aback, so *hurt*. . . . I ken fine you broke his heart this day, Jenna Winslow.'

Jenna looked away, her throat working as she fought for self-control. 'As did mine, Meg,' she said, a break in her voice. Suddenly she was in the housekeeper's arms, being soothed against a comforting shoulder. 'And now he's—*drunk* in the barn!'

Meg saw nothing unusual in that. 'It's our way,' she said by way of explanation, 'and not only ours. Many a person seeks comfort from a bottle when things are not

to be borne.'

For a moment Jenna sobbed wholeheartedly, finding relief in giving way to her emotions. 'Oh, Meg,' she cried at last, 'I'd give anything to undo what I did. I want to be married to Alex, arrogant, ruthless, *cruel* creature that he is!'

'What a silly pair to be sure—each of you longing for the other and both of you too proud to be the first to say so.'

A sigh shook the English girl. 'What am I do?' she asked wearily.

The housekeeper turned resolutely to the fire. 'First we'll have a cup of tea,' she said firmly 'and then we'll put our minds together and just be thinking of something.'

Jenna watched as she took down the square wooden tea-caddy and unhooked the lid, spooning the precious luxury into the teapot with care. At last the fragrant brew was poured into the shallow cups and the women sipped appreciatively in silence for a few seconds. The smell of the China tea carried Jenna back to many drawing-rooms, reminding her of all the other times she had crooked her little finger elegantly among female company and made genteel conversation; now she and Meg Grant had little time for the niceties of manners, and none at all for elegant conversation.

'Well?' she asked at last. 'What shall I do?'

The older woman set her cup back in the saucer with a snap. 'Make it up, of course,' she said roundly.

Jenna stared at her. 'H-how? We have gone too far for it to be easy.'

'Nothing worth having is *easy*. You and the MacKenzie are right for each other, you belong together.' She looked at Jenna, a hint of a smile at the back of her

eyes. 'You don't need an old maid to tell you what to do, I hope.'

'N-no,' agreed Jenna slowly, 'but he's sleeping off the effects of a monumental over-indulgence.'

'He'll no' be sleeping tomorrow,' Meg Grant returned, blandly, earning a faint answering smile. 'But I can assure you of one thing, my lassie, and that's he'll not be the one to make the first move. You've sore hurt his pride, and your words will have to be over sweet before he forgives you.'

Jenna knew she was right, and that she would have to be the first to make a move to heal the breach. A short while ago and she would not have considered it, but now she could face the prospect with equanimity. 'I'll think of something, you may be sure,' she told the housekeeper calmly, and setting down her cup rose to her feet. 'And now let's set the house to rights. It looks as if a bull ran amok in here.'

Nodding her agreement, Mrs Grant went to the door and called loudly for the little maidservant. 'Mary—Mary! Drat the girl, wherever can she be? She's been in a funny mood all week, snivelling and mooning under my feet, more trouble than a help and that's certain, and now I've a mind she's run off somewhere. I'll go and look in her room.'

While she was gone Jenna began to collect the dirty plates and drinking vessels, and had just carried a tray into the kitchen when the housekeeper returned with a bundle in her arms.

'Did you ever know such an ungrateful wretch?' she cried. 'Look what I found outside your door!'

Jenna recognised the green dress she had given the girl at Christmas, and lifted her eyebrows in question.

'There's something in it, too,' went on Meg Grant putting the bundle on the table and unrolling it carefully.

The two women stared at the little pile of objects revealed, their eyes widening first in surprise and then in dawning horror.

'Well, will ye look at that, just,' breathed the house-keeper, and forgetting her Calvinistic principles, crossed herself quickly.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

SLOWLY Jenna approached the table and reaching out almost fearfully, touched the strange collection with one finger, turning over the little tuft of hair tied by a twist of cotton and flicking the tiny pile of nail-parings, hesitating at the rude cross made of twigs.

‘So—it was she,’ she said heavily. ‘*She* was the one who gave them to Morag, and I thought it was Alex!’

Mrs Grant looked up. ‘Himself? Oh, how could you? He’d never lend himself to such tricks of the devil.’

Suddenly too weary to stand, Jenna sank into a chair. ‘I never suspected Mary. She was the one who gave me a rowan cross to wear.’

‘Aye, well, I daresay she felt guilty and didn’t really wish any harm on you. There’s no doubt in my mind that Morag had some hold over her.’

Jenna thought briefly on all the heartache the girl had caused. Staring at the green dress, she was suddenly struck by a new thought. ‘But where is she?’

‘The Lord knows—but I’ll tell you this, she’ll not have gone home to the village. Her old Grannie would skelp her if she knew.’ The housekeeper thought for a moment. ‘I believe she got out of her window, for it was open when I went to her room, in which case she’ll not have gone long, for the rain had barely wet the windowsill.’

‘Surely she won’t have gone on to the mountain?’

‘There’s no telling—but the children have a favourite

meeting place in the summer, around the Black Rock up on the ben.'

Jenna looked up abruptly, wondering if Meg Grant knew of the cave, but one glance at the housekeeper's expression convinced her that the other was unaware of her Chief's secret.

'She could die up there on a night like this,' she exclaimed, and as though to emphasise her words the rain beat against the window with a sudden intensity.

The housekeeper was on her feet. 'I'll call the men—'

'What men?' Jenna asked bitterly. 'They're all drunk or asleep.' The women stared at each other, then Jenna climbed to her feet and said, 'I'll go.'

'Ye canna!' cried the other in shocked consternation.

'She can't have gone far. Keep a light in the back window and I'll use it as a guide.'

Without further pause Jenna marched to the door, took down her large plaid shawl that hung there, and before Meg could utter another protest had opened the door and vanished into the storm.

Hugging the thick plaid tightly about her head and shoulders she was at first unaware of the force of the elements, but once away from the shelter of the out-buildings the wind and rain struck her, stinging against her face with icy pellets and almost spinning her round with its strength.

The night was black, but by concentrating on the way Alex had brought her down from the Black Rock she took a bearing from the light behind her and felt fairly certain that she was heading in the right direction. Reminded by the weather of the night, months ago, when she fled from Alex, she knew now that the elements then had not been as bad as her city-self believed. Tonight she was not only stronger but less timid and more able to

take care of herself; walking along in the mud and the rain, she was surprised by her own ability to cope. Looking back, with her new-found self-confidence, she felt a surge of amused sympathy for the frail, useless creature she had been.

Suddenly struck by the thought that the night was so dark she could easily pass by her quarry and not see her, she began to sing loudly, pausing every now and then to call Mary's name. At last, when she judged she was a little over halfway to her destination, she thought she heard an answering call and, lifting her head into the rain, strained her ears against the noise of the wind.

'Mary! Mary!' she called, cupping her hands around her mouth and turning to face each direction.

She heard a voice behind her and knew that she must have passed the girl. Retracing her steps, she almost fell over the huddled form of the little scullery maid, crouched on a low boulder, her plaid pulled down over her head.

'Mary,' she cried thankfully, putting back the shawl and hugging the girl to her. 'Oh, Mary, you silly child—where did you think you were going?'

'To the B-black Rock, miss. I always go there when I'm miserable.' Mary's voice broke on a sob and she hid her face against Jenna. 'Oh, miss, haven't I been bad, just?'

Jenna soothed her as best she could, making understanding noises and patting her until the girl had recovered a little. 'Come on, now, it's time we were going home or we'll both catch a chill.' With an arm round her waist she pulled the girl to her feet and urged her towards the tiny light shimmering like a beacon from the farmhouse window. 'There's Mrs Grant waiting for us,' she said.

Mary dragged her feet. 'She'll beat me,' she muttered, hanging her head.

'Rubbish!' Jenna told her roundly. 'She'll tell you off, no doubt, for worrying us—'

'*Grannie*,' explained Mary, her voice muffled by the enveloping shawl and her own tears.

Jenna gave her wrist an impatient tug. 'Perhaps we won't have to tell her—if you promise never to have anything to do with such things again,' she offered, not pretending to believe that Mary was referring to anything but her relationship with Morag. 'You were very silly and irresponsible, Mary, and have caused a lot of trouble—now don't start bawling again, we're wet enough,' she finished, torn between exasperation and amusement as the girl burst into another flood of contrite tears.

At last by dint of much cajoling and bullying, she managed to persuade her to move slowly in the desired direction. The return journey was easier than the outgoing one as the wind was behind them and tended to blow them along rather than push them back, but their soaked plaids were heavy with rain, and each footstep made an effort by the glutinous mud that clung to their shoes.

With their arms about each other they plodded on, Jenna too tired now to do more than occasionally lift her head to look for the light and readjust their path in line with Tenafroich. They were still several hundred yards distant when she realised something was wrong; the light she had been watching was much too large and bright for a candle.

With horror she realised that the whole of Heather House seemed to be enveloped by a red glow. Pulling Mary to a standstill she rubbed her eyes and stared again, wondering if her eyes were playing tricks. Even as

she gazed the glow suddenly grew brighter, a brilliant red that silhouetted the black form of the house with sudden intensity.

'Fire!' she breathed, understanding. '*Fire!*' she cried, letting go the other girl and gathering up her skirts began to run, stumbling often and falling to her knees several times as she plunged across the uneven ground in her haste to reach the house.

As she drew nearer it became clear that the house itself was not alight; the conflagration was behind it. Even as she approached, flames burst through a roof, shooting several feet into the air and sending a shower of sparks skywards as the timbers fell.

'Dear God,' she prayed, realising that the barn was the scene of the fire, 'let them have got out in time.'

With her chest heaving for breath, Jenna entered the yard and saw at once that her worst fears were well-founded; if the men had escaped the fire they would have been fighting the blaze with the water from the cattle-trough and house well, but no one was in sight. The yard was empty of any living soul. Even Meg Grant was absent, and Jenna supposed she had gone in search of help.

On leaden legs Jenna crossed towards the door, and suddenly noticed that she was not alone. A figure had joined her, and with a start of astonishment she recognised the form of Morag Frazer walking beside her. At first she supposed she had come to offer aid, but one glance at the gloating triumph on the face turned to her, told her that the other's motive was far from kind.

'He's in there, Jenna Winslow—*look*,' her voice urged maliciously, seeming to fill Jenna's ears to the exclusion of all other sounds. Even the roar from the fire seemed deadened by her harsh whisper.

The English girl followed her pointing finger to the

open barn door and saw the interior illuminated like a stage-set. She could see that Alex still lay across the table, his red head cradled on one arm, his tartan clothing bright and shimmering in the glare from the flames that danced round him, but as yet appeared not to have touched him.

'Look up, Jenna, look up,' whispered the insistent voice in her ear, and obeying, she gazed upward and saw with a gasp of horror that just above Alex's head a charred and burning roof-beam was about to fall. With a wild cry she started forward, dragging her skirt free from some impediment that would have held her back. She ran towards the barn. As she drew near the heat seared her face while the smoke half blinded her, and each breath she took filled her lungs with burning painful air.

Pausing on the threshold only long enough to draw her wet plaid lower over her face as a means of some slight protection, she plunged into the barn and was met by such a wall of heat that she thought her clothes would burst into flames. Her impetus had carried her well into the barn, but now her body seemed to grow weaker by the moment. Before she had been quite certain of Alex's position, but now the interior had grown dim—although the flames still burned as brightly, the heat and smoke pained her eyes and she could no longer see him.

Brushing aside the tears from her smarting eyes, she peered distractedly about, conscious of the terrible heat that was rapidly drying her wet clothes and striking up through the thick soles of her shoes.

'Alex!' she cried in desperation. 'Alex—where are you?'

Her voice was lost amid the hungry roar of the fire, and for the first time panic overtook her. She was encircled by a ring of flames that scorched her skin and

clothes. Her labouring lungs could find no air, the fringe of her plaid suddenly turned black, scorched into a cinder, and Jenna knew beyond any doubt that she was about to die in that flaming building.

Overhead a blackened beam broke free and began to fall. Snapping into pieces, it landed at her feet, spraying burning timber and sparks against her skirt. With her mouth wide in a soundless scream, Jenna brushed at the smouldering material and saw the edge of her skirt catch fire. Her scorched lungs were in agony, and coughing and choking she sank slowly to her knees as all strength left her. Suddenly she was so tired that nothing mattered or had any meaning.

'Alex,' she tried to call, and stretched out a hand to where she thought he was, as the world grew dim about her and she sank down into the spinning black void.

Later she became dimly aware that she was no longer surrounded by fierce heat, and turned her face up thankfully to the cold rain that was still falling. Arms were holding her and hands gently put back the scorched plaid. Above her an anxious face appeared, smudged and dirty from the effects of the fire. With a thrill of joy she recognised the strands of red hair that had broken free from the confines of the black ribbon.

'Alex,' she breathed, her voice little more than a kitten's mew, and turned her face into his shoulder, falling asleep like a tired child.

Intermittently conscious, she was sometimes aware of being lifted and cared for, of fresh, cool sheets against her hot skin, of pain in her burned hands and of voices and hands that soothed and comforted her. But mainly she seemed to drift in a limbo of black nothingness, with occasional nightmares that left her screaming and panic-stricken.

Gradually her periods of consciousness grew longer, until at last she awoke and knew that she was in her own bed. For a while she was content to look at the familiar room, her eyes wandering idly until she looked out of the window and saw a white landscape. Bewildered, she stared at the thick snow, remembering only that the last time she had looked at the surrounding countryside it had been drenched in rain. Slowly she raised her gaze, fearful to look further and yet unaware of that which frightened her, and saw with a wild pang of shock that the barn was a blackened shell, its stark lines only slightly softened by the covering of snow.

Her involuntary catch of breath brought the person sitting by the fire to her feet and hurrying across the floor.

'Oh, Miss Jenna, it's back with us you are,' Meg Grant cried thankfully, and dropped a warm kiss on her cheek.

'H-how long have I been here?' Jenna asked, astonished to hear how weak was her voice.

'Over a week,' she was told as the housekeeper immediately set about plumping up her pillow and smoothing the quilt. 'You had a fever, and old Grannie Smith cut your hair off.'

Jenna put up a bandaged hand and felt the short spikes of her hair while the other woman went on.

'Wasn't that woman an unexpected treasure, just? With Morag gone and no doctor nearer than Inverness, we'd no one to turn to. We'd no idea she had such knowledge until Mary said she treated her own family, and in desperation Himself sent for her.'

'What did she do, besides cut off my hair?' Jenna asked with a weak laugh.

'She brought concoctions and bathed your burns, fed you potions to kill the fever. I'm telling you, she couldn't have taken better care of you if she'd been your own

mother. You've her to thank for your life.'

Jenna was silent, thinking, then: 'I've an idea I have someone else to thank as well,' she said slowly, her voice shaking as she gathered enough strength to ask the all important question. 'Alex,' she said with difficulty, 'it wasn't a dream—I didn't imagine—' Her mouth trembled uncontrollably and she put her hands to her face as tears of weakness flooded her eyes.

'Losh, now,' Mrs Grant soothed gently, 'the master is fine. He's the one that saved you when you ran into the heart of the fire like one demented.'

Jenna had only heard her first words and sank back against her pillows, weak with relief.

'He's been sitting here most of the time in case you had need of him. I'd just sent him down stairs for a wee rest, but I'll give him a call and you can see for yourself.'

Jenna's heart beat quickly as she waited for him to appear and she caught her breath as she heard his quick footsteps on the wooden stairs. The door was opened and Alex stood in the opening, his eyes searching eagerly for her face. He was wearing his old faded tartan trews and an ancient jacket, but to Jenna he had never looked so handsome and, with a catch of her breath, she held out her arms.

Without a word Alex folded her against him, holding her tightly, his head resting against her hair. Gently he turned up her face and looked deep into her eyes. Whatever he read there satisfied him, for he bent his head to kiss her tenderly.

'Ah, Jenna—when I thought I'd lost you—' he murmured, his voice deep with feeling, and unable to finish the sentence he gathered her closer. 'Whatever possessed you to go dashing past me like that?'

'But—the yard was empty! You were in the barn. I

saw you,' Jenna told him, bewildered.

'We were fighting the fire,' Alex said, as puzzled as she.

Jenna shook her head. 'No—the yard was empty, save for Morag—'

'Morag!'

Alex's grasp tightened painfully and Jenna stirred in his arms. 'Yes,' she persisted, suddenly afraid. 'She told me you were in the barn and pointed . . . *weren't* you?'

He shook his head.

'I saw you, Alex, quite clearly.'

'You can't have, for I was not there,' he insisted deliberately. 'Whatever you saw was an illusion. Let me tell you what *I* saw. You came running down from the ben and paused as you entered the yard, gazing at the fire. Then you ran straight into the barn with the expression of a sleep-walker. When I realised your intention I tried to stop you, shouting at first and then catching your shawl, but nothing could stop you—you were a demented creature, *mo ghail*.'

Jenna lay still against him, trying to make sense out of what had happened.

'And Morag?' she asked, 'what of her?'

Again Alex shook his head, but sensing some constraint in his manner Jenna pressed him for an answer.

'It may be nothing,' he told her reluctantly, 'but we found a body of a woman in the burnt-out barn. No one is missing and we thought it must be a gipsy woman who had crept in for shelter, unknown to us.'

'And you think it might be Morag?'

'You say she was around.'

Jenna turned her head to search his face. 'Did you see her?' she asked, insistently, and allowed a sigh to escape her when he slowly shook his head.

'You were alone,' he said quietly.

'Dear God!' exclaimed Jenna suddenly remembering the wax doll. 'She told me to be careful of fire, when I threw the i-image she had made into her hearth.' And overcome by horror, she hid her face in his chest.

Gently Alex soothed her until the wild trembling had grown less, smoothing her hair and murmuring endearments until she grew calm.

'Morag was evil,' he said at last. 'Whether there was any truth in her claims or not, she was wicked in thought and deed. If it *was* her in the barn, then she met the fate she deserved. And now we'll talk no more of her. Let Morag Frazer be forgotten.'

'They'll whisper her tale round the fire on dark nights,' ventured Jenna, shivering at the prospect.

'Not if I can help it,' the MacKenzie said grimly. 'I'll punish any who speak her name, and in the years to come it will be as if she was never born.'

The finality in his voice spoke of his determination, and Jenna was reminded forcibly that the man who held her was an hereditary Highland Chieftain, and had once held power of life or death over his people.

As though sensing her disquiet, Alex bent his head to smile into her eyes and the hard expression left him. 'But *you, ghaiol mo chridhe*, love of my heart, will be spoken of as MacKenzie's love. Children will sing of your beauty and old folk will warm the long winter evenings with the tale of the English lassie who stole the hearts of a hundred thousand clansmen.'

Jenna gave herself up to his kiss, feeling a flood of such happiness coursing through her veins that she was filled with joy and contentment.

'If tales are told,' she whispered softly, 'then they will be of MacKenzie and his wife, spoken in one breath. From now on, my bold Highlander, we belong together — let none separate us, even in song.'